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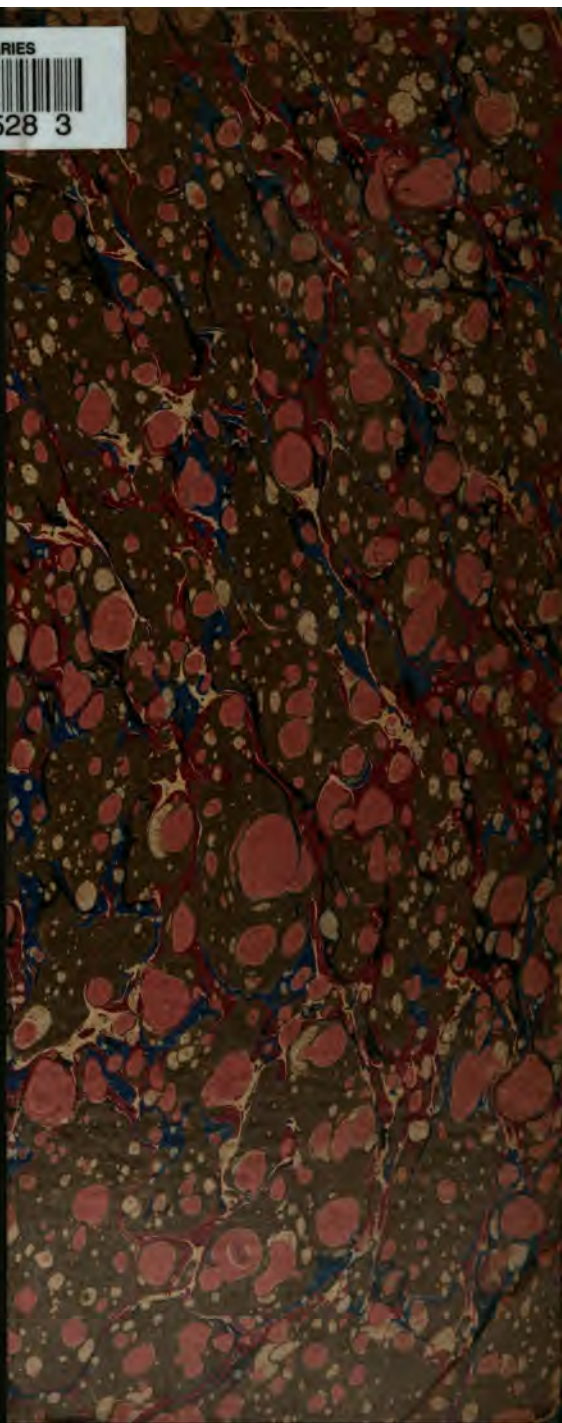
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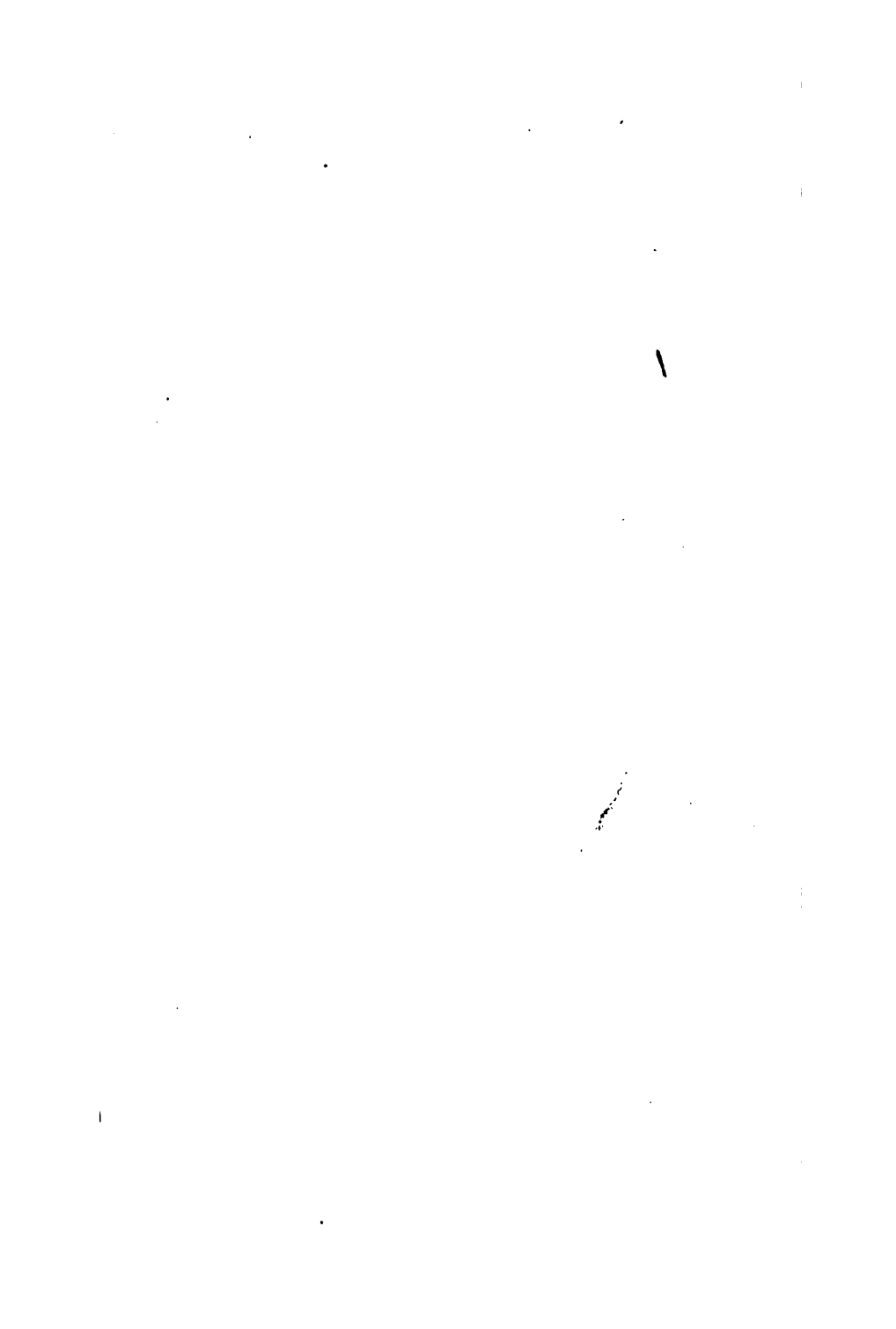


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A

BACHELOR'S BRIDAL.

BY

MRS. H. LOVETT CAMERON,

AUTHOR OF

"IN A GRASS COUNTRY," "VERA NEVILL," "A DAUGHTER'S HEART," ETC.

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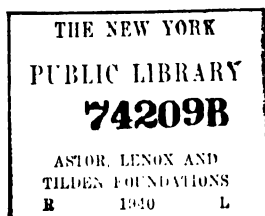
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A BACHELOR'S BRIDAL.

CHAPTER I.

IF to be born in Manchester Square, to be educated at Westminster School, to work for one's living all day in Lincoln's Inn Fields, and to toil for one's pleasure all night in the drawing-rooms of Mayfair and Belgravia, be sufficient to constitute a cockney, then was Valentine Bryant of all men the most cockneyfied.

By thus briefly describing his career I do not intend to imply that the whole of Mr. Bryant's existence had been spent within the venerable shadows of the metropolis. Far from it. He had at divers times and seasons travelled upon the Continent, shot upon Scotch moors, and fished in Irish and Norwegian rivers. He had, moreover, doubtless spent as many idle hours in the rural and tranquil occupations of country life as fall to the lot of most London men of business who have as much work as they can

manage to get through, and enjoy as many holidays as a thoroughly busy life can admit of.

Nevertheless he was a Londoner to the backbone, and when upon a certain morning in April Mr. Bryant awoke and looked somewhat eagerly forth out of his bedroom window, his sensations as he threw up the sash and let in the fresh spring air, and with it a gleam of pale and fitful sunshine, were distinctly those of a cockney born and bred who has escaped from the smoke of London, and to whom country sights and sounds are wonderful and delightful things.

"This is delicious!" he murmured to himself, as, with a rashness unworthy of his forty years, he leaned upon the window-sill in the slender raiment in which he had lately risen from his bed, and sniffed up the cool freshness of the morning,—“quite delicious! I had no idea that any place could look so pretty at this time of the year.”

What he looked down upon was simply a garden,—but a garden that was gay with daffodils and tulips and sweet with the scent of violets and wall-flowers. Moreover, it was alive with blackbirds and thrushes, who sought for their breakfast with quick eager beak-thrusts in the



bosom of the green lawn and then retreated swiftly to neighboring bushes, where, after swallowing their victims at ease, they burst forth into veritable shouts of thanksgiving over the excellence of the repast. That, at least, was how Valentine Bryant, who was of a practical turn of mind, and who watched their proceedings with the keen interest of a sportsman rather than with the idealism of a poet, interpreted their actions to his own understanding.

Beyond the garden was a wood, and the wood was filled with delightful things,—things wonderful to see and impossible to describe; soft fluffy things like little puffs of swan's down that fluttered away on every breath of wind, hard semi-transparent things like shells, for which there seemed to be no name or purpose, fat brown sticky buds, filmy fringes of catkins tossing their fingers to the breeze, and wand-like spears, white and glistening, that shot up from one could not see where, in every direction. Crowning the wood stood a clump of dark Scotch firs and an almond-tree, pink with blossoms; and then the trees fell away steeply down a hill-side, on purpose, as it were, to give to the beholder a glimpse of pale blue distance far

away, lying all hazy and indistinct in the morning sunshine.

“It is delicious!” said Valentine Bryant aloud to himself once more; and then, as though fearing perhaps to have committed himself too much, for the legal mind is ever cautious, even in solitude, he added, more reflectively, “It is certainly a pretty place. It looked gloomy enough when I arrived in the darkness last night; but it is very pretty this morning. I wonder, by the way, what my host and my host’s family will be like, and what sort of people are these among whom I have come to stay.”

At this moment there appeared from the corner of the wood the figure of a lady in a dark dress, who came through the wicket gate into the garden.

Mr. Bryant, mindful of the incompleteness of his costume, withdrew hastily from the window and pulled down his blind, but, being impelled by an irresistible feeling of curiosity, he could not help peeping out from behind its shelter at the new arrival upon the placid scene he had been contemplating. He was able to see that the lady was quite young and that she had a slender and very graceful figure, with a coil

of fair hair below the edge of a wide garden-hat which shaded the upper part of her face completely. For the rest, she was too far off, and his own point of observation too unsatisfactory, for him to be able to form any opinion.

He was about to relinquish his position in order to proceed with the operations of washing and dressing, which were still untackled, when something caused him to remain stationary. This was the curious demeanor of the lady he had been watching.

Instead of either walking round the garden or else crossing the lawn towards the house, as a young lady returning from a morning ramble might be reasonably supposed to do, she stood for some moments stock still just inside the gate, looking up fixedly at the windows; then she turned round again and re-entered the wood through the little wicket gate behind her. Walking quickly up to a dark-leaved holly-bush about twenty yards away, she then turned slowly round until she faced the house again. From this point she took a few steps in one direction and then a few steps back again, after which she began pacing the ground carefully, apparently counting her footsteps as she did so. Having

evidently arrived at the spot at which her calculations aimed, she suddenly bent down and seemed to search for something upon the ground. She remained for some moments crouched down with her back to the house, then suddenly she rose and walked briskly back through the gate into the garden.

At the risk of being detected, Bryant looked through the chink of his blind with all his might and main, so eager was he to discover what she could have found or picked up, but all he could see in her hands as she came back through the garden gate was a small bunch of primroses and wild anemones.

Was it to pick these simple flowers, then, that all those extraordinary manœuvres had been gone through?

Mr. Bryant was a sober-minded and eminently a practical man, devoid alike of romance and of imagination. He was accustomed to assert that for every action under the sun there is always to be found a rational cause and a corresponding effect; but for the life of him he could not perceive any reason whatever why that lady had paced up and down in so singular a manner, if the effect of her gyrations and evolutions was to

be nothing more than a bunch of wild flowers. He went on with his dressing in a puzzled, not to say a sobered, frame of mind. Here was distinctly something he could not understand.

It may be as well to describe briefly what was his position in the house of the pretty garden with the wooded slopes below it.

Valentine Bryant was a solicitor, and he had come to Hillside simply and solely on business, at the summons of a client with whom he had no personal acquaintance.

Mr. Kirby, having had several business transactions which had been carried on by letter, wrote to Bryant one day and asked him if he would come down and stay from a Saturday to Monday in order to arrange the preliminaries of the marriage settlements between his son and his ward. Mr. Kirby wrote that he had accidentally discovered that he had been at college with Bryant's father, and that it could give him pleasure to make the acquaintance of the son of his old friend.

Bryant had accepted the invitation entirely as a matter of business, for although he replied in a few civil words as to his satisfaction at the prospect of meeting Mr. Kirby, he was not, in

truth, specially desirous of doing so. But business is business, and Mr. Bryant never neglected a new client, great or small; hence probably his success in his profession. So, although he was unable to go down on the day appointed until the very last train, so that he was received at twelve o'clock at night by his host's butler, who offered him refreshment and lighted him to his bedroom, yet he did actually present himself at Hillside on Saturday the 20th day of April, in order to remain until the Monday, as he had been invited to do.

Valentine Bryant was not only, as I have said, a Londoner, he was also a thorough man of the world. Such society as he had had time for had been of the best, and he had the natural and easy manners and the self-possession of a man who is conscious of his own value, and perfectly at home in any situation in which he may find himself.

When at length on this particular Sunday morning he issued out of his bedroom and proceeded to find his way down to the breakfast-room in order to encounter his unknown client and his family, he was not at all sensible of any awkwardness in the position, nor did it seem to

him in any way embarrassing that he should be completely in the dark concerning the people he was about to meet.

I have stated already that Mr. Bryant was forty; he was therefore presumably past the age of romance and illusions, from which, indeed, his whole life had been remarkably free; but for all that he was a very good-looking man still. His figure was tall and erect, he had dark close-cropped hair slightly sprinkled with gray, and a smooth-shaven face with straight clean-cut features. His eyes were very dark blue, thoughtful, penetrating eyes, that impressed people somehow of themselves with the conviction that he was a clever man. It was an intellectual face, and yet it was a cold face, and a trifle hard. Perhaps, however, the softer part of the man had never yet been awakened. Hard work and the intricacies of the legal profession are not naturally softening elements in themselves, and he had never had any domestic ties to counteract them, whilst such faint and feeble imitations of love as had shot across his life had been never a delight but invariably a bore to him. Marriage had never entered even remotely into his scheme of existence. As a moralist he had

looked about him and taken note of the many ill-assorted and unhappy marriages there are in the world, and as a practical man he had come to the conclusion that the risks to be run were not worth the experiment. Given success, popularity, and a fair income, it seemed to him that a bachelor's life in London left nothing for any reasonable man to desire.

The breakfast-room at Hillside was flooded with morning sunshine; the round table between the long French windows and the fire was loaded with silver dishes and with white-and-gold china; a brass kettle sang cosily upon the hob; a fox-terrier lay stretched upon the hearth-rug; and as Bryant entered the room his host turned quickly round from his morning paper and greeted him cordially with outstretched hands:

“Good-morning, Mr. Bryant. I am delighted to welcome you here, and am only sorry that my health did not admit of my sitting up to receive you last night. I hope Dalston attended to you properly and made you comfortable, and that you have slept well?”

Nothing could exceed the cordiality and the genial hospitality of these words, and in the

ordinary course of things Bryant would have responded to them with all the warmth of manner and the readiness of courtesy which were natural to him and which made him justly popular among his fellows; but as he grasped the proffered hand and opened his lips with a pleasant smile in order to utter the courteous little speech which should have come spontaneously from them, he experienced a sudden sense of unutterable aversion and repulsion towards the man before him. The smile on his face faded, the words remained unspoken, his fingers slipped limply out of his host's grasp, and his only reply was a bow and a few murmured words of acknowledgment that were almost inaudible.

What was it that had so powerfully affected him?

He could not tell. Mr. Kirby was by no means a handsome man, but neither was he specially ill-favored. He had that sort of personal appearance which is best described by the word "ordinary." He was of middle height and of middle age, his features were unremarkable, his hair and beard of a dull dusty brown, and his hands, of which he was possibly somewhat vain, were very well formed, with long

tapering fingers and almond-shaped nails, which he appeared to take some pleasure in displaying. In all this there was certainly nothing to account for the shudder of repugnance which swept over the sensible and practical-minded solicitor with such a force as to be absolutely overwhelming.

The impression, however, was curiously transient. Almost instantly he began to recover from it, and as, at his host's instance, he sat down to the well-furnished breakfast-table, he took himself severely to task for his folly. What had possessed him? Was he going to have an illness, or had he taken leave of his senses? he asked himself. And then he found himself once more talking easily and naturally, as if no strange warning instinct had shaken his self-possession for one brief and incomprehensible moment. As Mr. Kirby handed him his cup of tea he forced himself to look at him steadily and scrutinizingly, to see if he could trace in his features or expression any cause for the shrinking repugnance he had experienced as he had met his hand. But no, there was nothing to account for it,—absolutely nothing.

“I see you are looking at the vacant place

at the table, Mr. Bryant," observed Mr. Kirby, with a smile. "It is my ward, who is always late. She will be here directly, no doubt."

"Your ward? that is the young lady whose marriage settlement I am to have the pleasure of drawing up, I presume."

"Yes. I feel I ought to apologize for bringing you down here, but I am such a wretched invalid——"

"My dear sir, pray do not apologize. I am only too glad of an excuse for a day in the country." And then Bryant stole a quick glance at his host, but could see in his appearance no traces of the ill health to which he had more than once alluded, and which had made the plea for his summoning the solicitor to Hill-side instead of seeking him in his chambers in Lincoln's Inn.

"But about my ward," resumed Mr. Kirby, laying down his knife and fork: "before she comes, let me tell you something about her. She is the orphan child and heiress of a cousin of my late wife's, who left her to my charge on his death-bed, now more than ten years ago. Ah, Mr. Bryant! it has been a great responsibility, I assure you! Enid Fairfax has caused

me many anxieties! As wilful and pig-headed a girl as ever you came across! Once she sets her mind upon a thing, there is no moving her. It is a dreadful business, this engagement to my son!"

Bryant looked up with some surprise: "But surely it is an excellent match? I think you told me that Miss Fairfax has——"

"Thirty thousand pounds, sir,—not a penny less! But therein lies the chief of my trouble."

Bryant laughed: "Excuse me, Mr. Kirby, if I fail to see it in that light. I should imagine the lady's fortune to be a matter of congratulation to yourself and your son."

Mr. Kirby cast up his long white hands with a gesture of expostulation: "Ah! there is where you men of the world, Mr. Bryant, can never enter into the feelings of a sensitive recluse like myself. Do you not see how such a position galls my pride and casts a slur upon my integrity? I am a poor man, living in a small way, with but a modest competence to leave to my only son: this girl, who is rich, is cast upon my care as a child, and no sooner does she become a woman than I marry her off to my son! Only think what will be said of me! And yet, I

assure you, this marriage is the last desire of my heart, and I would do anything in the world to avoid the imputations that it will cast upon my disinterestedness."

"The sentiment does you honor, Mr. Kirby; but pardon me if I venture to ask why in the world you don't put a stop to the marriage if it is so repugnant to you."

"Impossible! impossible, my dear sir!" cried Mr. Kirby, again casting up his hands. "The girl herself is the obstacle: she is bent upon marrying my son."

"And is not your son bent upon marrying her?" questioned Bryant with interest.

"Oh, I do not say to the contrary,—God forbid!—but James would consent to be guided by me were it not for my ward's obstinacy and determination to have her way. But hush! not another word! here she comes!"

The door opened. Valentine Bryant looked up quickly, then rose to his feet and bowed. "Lucky James!" he murmured below his breath.

Enid Fairfax had entered the room.

CHAPTER II.

HE thought her the most beautiful creature he had ever seen in his life.

Enid's beauty, like her name, was of pure Saxon type; her hair was neither golden nor auburn, but simply of the palest brown, and lay in a soft thick knot low down upon her neck; her eyes were of a full and heavenly blue, fringed by long lashes of a darker shade than her hair, and in her delicate coloring and oval face there lay all the subtle refinement of a portrait by Vandyke. In figure she was tall and slight, with a certain unformed girlishness of outline that gave promise of greater perfection by and by; but nothing could exceed the perfection of her hands and feet, and the subtle grace of every movement of her body.

As she entered the room, Bryant rose out of sheer homage to her loveliness. The fair sex did not affect him very much, as a rule, and it would be untrue to say that as a man his pulses beat any the quicker for her entrance; but as a person of artistic and cultivated tastes, her

beauty impressed him very much indeed, just as a rare picture affected him when he went to some famous collector's sale at Christie's; she was not to him a woman of flesh and blood, so much as a specimen of fine art, to be regarded with critical admiration.

As the girl came in, she cast a quick glance of eager suspicion from her guardian to the stranger on the farther side of the table, then her eyes fell.

Mr. Kirby introduced her to his guest. Miss Fairfax bowed in silence, and took her place at the table.

Presently she lifted her eyes, and Bryant noticed with appreciative pleasure how fully, deeply blue they were, and what a strange intensity of expression underlay their loveliness.

"I should like to have some conversation with you, Mr. Bryant," she said, addressing him for the first time, with a curious intonation of defiance in the words.

"Of course, my dear!" cried her guardian, cheerily, before Valentine could so much as open his lips in reply; "we are going to have a great talk, all about business, but not until after lunch, my love,—not until after lunch. It

is Sunday morning, and Mr. Bryant is a hard-worked man. This morning he must rest:—you must come with us to our dear little village church,” turning to him, “a most charming service, I assure you, quite a typical country choir; and our vicar, good man, old as he is, preaches such capital sermons; you will like to hear him.”

Bryant murmured an assent. He would, if the truth be told, have preferred to take the day of rest with a pipe and a book in the sunny garden, to being carried off to the morning service, however excellently conducted; but there are occasions when a guest feels it to be his duty to fall in with his host's suggestions, and he did not venture to object.

“After lunch,” continued Mr. Kirby, urbanely, waving those white hands which Bryant began to detest,—“after lunch we will transact our little business—at three o'clock precisely, in the library, Mr. Bryant,”—lifting a long finger at him to enforce the hour upon his memory. “Three o'clock! Don't forget.—And you, my love,” turning to his ward, “can, if you desire, be present at the consultation.”

“Will that suit you, Miss Fairfax?” inquired the solicitor, politely.

Miss Fairfax nibbled her toast in silence and bent her head very slightly in assent.

Breakfast had been somewhat late, and as they rose from the table the church-bells began to ring. Mr. Kirby threw open the French window that looked out on the lawn, and the sweet sound of the distant bells mingled harmoniously with the song of the birds in the garden without.

As he stood there with his back to the room, Valentine was suddenly surprised by a soft touch upon his arm. He turned: Miss Fairfax stood close behind him.

She put her finger upon her lips and glanced at her guardian's back.

"Be there at a quarter before three," she whispered, almost inaudibly.

Mr. Kirby moved. In a second Enid was somewhere away at the other side of the table, looking over some newspapers that had come by the morning's post. Bryant was somehow convinced that Kirby had heard or guessed the whispered words; and he felt horribly uncomfortable.

The girl whom he had seen, before he left his room, performing curious gyrations in the soli-

tude of the wood, and the girl who had whispered those few unexpected words in his ear, were one and the same person, and yet Enid Fairfax the heiress, whose whole mind was bent upon marrying James Kirby, seemed to be quite another person altogether. Whence came this dual personality?

"Where is your son?" inquired Bryant of his host as the little party of three set out to walk to church together through the bright pale April sunshine.

"He is away, I am sorry to say, Mr. Bryant. I much regret that I am unable to give myself the pleasure of introducing him to you, but unforeseen business has summoned him from home for a few days."

"I should have been glad to make Mr. James Kirby's acquaintance," replied Valentine, civilly: "however," with a smiling glance at the girl by his side, "it is, I hope, only a pleasure deferred, is it not, Miss Fairfax?" Enid made no reply, and Bryant, whose business had taught him to be observant, noticed that there was no conscious blush upon her face as he mentioned her lover's name.

On the contrary, he fancied that she even

became a shade paler than usual, and there was no mistake about the slight nervous compression of her lips, as though some effort of inward self-restraint were taking place in her mind.

Enid Fairfax began to interest him.

The church, when they reached it, was small and primitive, the choir much as all country choirs are wont to be,—that is to say, somewhat tuneless and timeless,—and the congregation was entirely composed of rustics. The clergyman was old, and his voice feeble. When the time for the lessons came, Mr. Kirby rose and walked into the reading-desk. He had a beautiful voice, clear and sweet, and he read the sacred words impressively and solemnly. Bryant thought he had never understood or appreciated the parable of the unjust steward, which happened to be the second lesson, so well before.

By and by Mr. Kirby also handed the plate: he appeared to be church-warden, and to fulfil all duties of that position earnestly and effectively.

All the time Enid sat, or stood, or knelt by his side, with a face of imperturbable gravity. She did not join audibly either in the prayers

or the praises, and Bryant could not help fancying that her thoughts were far away. Perhaps she was dreaming of her absent lover. His own thoughts were wandering. These people among whom he had fallen excited his curiosity: he could not understand either the girl beside him or the man who was at the moment handing the collection-plate to him and at the same time joining devoutly and fervently in the hymn that was being sung.

Was he a consummate hypocrite? or was he a pious and religious man, to whom Bryant was doing a great injustice? For the life of him he could not tell.

On the way back to the house, and all through lunch, Bryant began to incline to the belief that Mr. Kirby was an excellent and upright man, much vexed in his mind by the vagaries of a turbulent and rebellious ward. Had he not said of her that she was obstinate and pig-headed?—what a horrible word, by the way, to apply to such a beautiful woman! He glanced at her across the table: “pig-headed,” indeed! Why, her head was exquisite,—Vandyke and Raphael combined. What a heresy, what a sacrilege, to apply such an epithet to it!

Still, he was forced to admit to himself that there was undoubtedly something in the determined silence of this girl, in her down-bent eyes and the firm hard lines of her mouth, that might be distinctly said to savor of obstinacy.

"Perhaps when I have seen a little more of her, I shall understand her better," thought the clever lawyer, who hated to be balked by anything or anybody. "I wonder what she has got to say to me privately at a quarter to three?"

"Now, Mr. Bryant," said his host, as they rose from the table after lunch, "it is half-past two: I give you half an hour before we meet in the library in which to digest your lunch. But before you go, have a glass of this brown sherry. It is something very special, and I should like you to taste it. Unfortunately, sherry is forbidden me by my doctor: but my son considers it very fine. I should like your opinion on it."

He poured out the sherry, and Bryant drank it. He said that it was excellent, because he did not very well know how to say anything else, but privately he did not like it. It was a strong, full-bodied, dark-colored wine, but there was an after-flavor about it that struck him as disagreeable.

"Will you join me in the garden with a cigar?" inquired Mr. Kirby.

"Thanks, I never smoke till the evening. If you will allow me, I will go to my room to write a letter."

As he left the room by one door Mr. Kirby went out by another, and Bryant's eyes met Enid's.

He read their meaning, and, after a few moments' delay in his room to make sure that his host had left the house for a stroll in the garden, he came down-stairs again and went into the library.

"I will be there in good time," he thought, with a certain vague tremor of excitement; but the room was empty, so he sat down in a comfortable-looking arm-chair to wait for her.

And then and there a most curious and unusual thing happened to him. He became overpowered by an ever-increasing sensation of numbness and of lassitude. For some moments he fought against it, but soon a delightful dreaminess stole all over his limbs and he struggled no longer to resist it. He seemed to be asleep, and yet not asleep, for all the time he was conscious of being still in the library, and he could see the

table by which he was seated, with the books and papers upon it, and the flickering fire in the grate; yet everything seemed to be dim and far away, like objects that are seen through a fog.

Then some one whose voice sounded faint and distant like the sound of muffled bells seemed to be speaking to him.

"I am the most wretched woman in the whole world!" murmured that voice, dimly. "For God's sake rouse yourself and listen to me. I have no one on earth to help me. For pity's sake try and understand."

These sentences seemed to go on brokenly for some time; then they died away into a sort of throbbing nothingness, and he heard them no longer.

Absolute peace, and absolute silence. Then, after what might have been whole years of utter blankness, there came suddenly a rushing noise in his ears, and a tingling sensation in all his veins, then the jarring sound of laughter close beside him.

He sat up in his chair. Mr. Kirby stood opposite to him, laughing heartily.

"Ha, ha, ha! Awake at last?" he cried, gayly.

"Good gracious! What has happened to me?" stammered Valentine, bewilderedly, passing his hands over his brow and eyes.

"Nothing at all. You have only had a beautiful doze, my dear sir, and I have been waiting quietly by for you to wake up."

"Do you mean that I have been *asleep*? Why, I never did such a thing as go to sleep in the middle of the day in my life before! It is impossible!" cried Bryant, with some excitement.

"It is the country air, no doubt," answered Mr. Kirby. "This is a very bracing place, and my friends often tell me that the air makes them sleep. Never mind, Mr. Bryant; pray do not apologize."

Bryant had not apologized, but he did so now heartily, smitten with self-reproach at his own stupidity.

"I am really ashamed of myself, Mr. Kirby. I cannot think what possessed me. Why," glancing at the clock on the mantel-shelf, "it is half-past three! I must have been asleep nearly an hour! It is unpardonable!"

"Indeed, it is really of no consequence at all, Mr. Bryant: pray say no more. I have been

getting all the papers into order that I want you to go over with me."

"It must be your excellent lunch that made me sleepy," said Valentine; and then all at once he remembered the brown sherry, and a most uncomfortable thought entered his mind.

"Where is your ward?" he asked, turning towards the pile of papers on the table. "Was she not to have been present at our interview?"

"Oh, poor girl, she did come in, but she got tired of waiting for you to wake up. She wanted to get out for a walk this lovely afternoon, so I told her we could do very well without her; and so we can, Mr. Bryant, for, to my mind, women are always in the way when there is business to be done."

"But Miss Fairfax particularly said that she wished to speak to me," persisted Bryant, somewhat doggedly, for as his senses resumed their normal sharpness things began to assume a new aspect to him.

"Oh, I can tell you what she wanted: it was a question of pin-money. Ladies like a little spare cash to fling about. She wants a hundred a year or so, to play ducks and drakes with,

independent of her trustee. I dare say we can manage that for her."

There was nothing left for Bryant to do but to address himself to business.

He went into everything thoroughly, but, sift it as he would,—and he was determined to look sharply into the business,—he could discover no flaw in the management of Miss Fairfax's property. The schedule of her different investments was clearly and intelligibly made out, and there was not a fault to find either with them or with the accounts, which had been most carefully kept. Miss Fairfax's money had been neither wasted nor squandered during her minority; everything had been judiciously and advantageously arranged, so that her income had, if anything, increased during the last few years.

Then Mr. Kirby showed him a copy of her late father's will, and they proceeded to discuss the terms of the marriage settlements. It appeared that Miss Fairfax would be of age in three weeks' time, and that, according to her father's will, the day before she was twenty-one she would obtain, if still unmarried, the sole and entire control of her property; but in the event of her marriage taking place previously

to her attaining the age of twenty-one, her fortune was still to remain in trust in her guardian's hands.

Bryant saw in this provision an element of possible danger, for if the marriage were to be hurried forward so as to take place before her birthday, Enid would be entirely at the mercy of her sole trustee, who would retain a very considerable power over her fortune.

But there seemed to be no question of any such haste; and in the very sensible and simple directions which Mr. Kirby proceeded to give him, he could not detect the remotest intention of wronging his future daughter-in-law. Mrs. James Kirby's money was to be tied up in the usual way: such and such investments were to be permitted, and others were to be debarred. All seemed perfectly straightforward. There was, indeed, one clause in the late Mr. Fairfax's will which troubled him somewhat: it was to the effect that if his daughter died without issue before her guardian, the whole of her fortune was to revert to him.

"It is a very remote contingency," said Mr. Kirby, lightly; "besides, of course, her husband will have under these proposed settlements

a life interest in her money. They are both very young, and in all human probability they will both survive me. I only hope I shall live to see half a dozen grandchildren about the house! It was merely an empty compliment to myself, which her poor father was anxious to pay me." Bryant agreed that it was a very remote contingency, for, as Mr. Kirby rightly said, in all human probability such a clause would never come into effect.

Bryant did not see Enid again until dinner-time. He was to leave in the morning by the first train, so that he would have to make an early start.

As at lunch, the beautiful girl sat silently by throughout the meal, scarcely joining in the conversation at all, and presently Bryant became seized with an overwhelming desire to exchange a few words with her.

As she rose from the table she looked at him, and her eyes seemed, to his excited fancy, to be full of reproach and sadness. A few minutes later, regardless of his host, he rose and followed her into the drawing-room. She was standing on the hearth-rug, gazing absently into the fire. Bryant made a couple of quick strides to her

side. He had left Mr. Kirby locking up the wine in the cellarette. It was now or never; he had no time for flowers of speech and ceremony. "I failed you to-day," he said, in a rapid whisper: "you can't think how sorry I am. It was not my fault."

"I knew you could not help it. It is all of a piece with the rest," she added, enigmatically and almost despondingly.

"If I could only understand,—if you could only explain," he said, in a puzzled way.

The ghost of a smile played over her features: "I tried to to-day, but you were past hearing me, and now the chance is gone." And she glanced nervously towards the open door.

Then he remembered the pleading voice in his dreams,—the voice which had entreated him to listen and to understand. Was it no dream-fancy, but a living reality, then? And was it Enid who had spoken thus in vain?

With a passionate intensity born of the horrible feeling that he had been tricked and outwitted, he caught the slender hand that was hanging idly at her side, and pressed it earnestly.

"If I can serve you or help you, I entreat you to command me!" he said almost breathlessly.

She looked up at him swiftly; her whole face became lit up, her eyes shone, her lips smiled, there was hope and gladness in every radiant feature. "Do you mean it, really, really? Will you be my friend? Promise it quickly!"

"I promise it—I swear it, upon my honor!" he answered, fervently.

Her hand dropped out of his; her face resumed its normal pale and almost hopeless apathy; her eyes glanced beyond him towards the door.

"I will remember," she said, almost inaudibly. "I may want a friend soon, very soon." Then she crouched down and warmed her hands at the fire. At this moment Mr. Kirby joined them.

CHAPTER III.

ONE evening about a week later Bryant found himself standing, precisely at eight o'clock, upon the door-step of No. 25 Halkin Street. Of all the many houses at which he was accustomed to dine, there was none at which it gave him greater pleasure to present himself as a guest.

Mr. and Mrs. Challenger were the greatest friends he had in the world, and Mrs. Challenger was certainly the only woman in his life whose society gave him any real pleasure.

She was the dearest woman on earth, he was wont to assert, and her house was the very nicest in all London.

She had everything that could recommend her to his esteem and appreciation. She was a smart, well-dressed little woman, with a sufficiency of good looks to render her attractive; her conversation was clever and original, her views on all subjects were broad and liberal; and above all, and over all, and far beyond all these other lesser recommendations, her cook

was absolutely perfect, and her dinners the best that could be imagined. To sit at her pretty table in the cosey dining-room of her charming house, and to partake of those varied and wonderful *entrées*, those soups and roasts, those savories and sauces, was enough to make the daintiest epicure render thanks to heaven for the satisfaction of being alive to feast upon them.

Our friend Valentine was most keenly gratified by these refinements of the gastronomical art. To dine at the Challengers' was but another name for dining as well as it was possible to dine. He was conscious, too, that on the nights that he dined there the most flattering efforts were made on the part of his hostess and her satellite for his benefit; for your artist in cookery loves nothing so well as an appreciated dinner, and Mrs. Challenger and the cook used to cudgel their brains together for hours in order to invent new dishes for his delectation.

But it was not wholly for the dinners that Bryant liked to come to the house. The company pleased him quite as well, and his fellow-guests were always well chosen and harmoniously arranged. Mrs. Challenger was a past-mistress in the art of bringing the right people together,

and, as she was very fond of Valentine, she always put forth her best efforts to please him.

"You are the nicest woman I know, Princess," he said to her one day, using in privacy the pet name by which her husband called her, and for which no one knew the why or wherefore, for there was nothing in the least imposing or princess-like about her. "The only nice woman, I may say; for you are the only one who will allow me to enjoy myself without wanting to marry me off to some girl or other."

"Why on earth should I want you to marry?" Marion Challenger answered. "If you were married, I should lose you: '*Un homme marié est un homme mort.*' I had just as soon see you in your coffin. When you come to tell me that it is to be, I shall start off and order my mourning."

"I don't think you will have to wear crape on my account, then, Princess."

"I heartily hope not. Indeed, I begin to believe now that the danger is past, and that you are safe. I was terribly afraid for you at one time, for you know you were a very good-looking fellow once, Valentine; but now—well, you are not quite so young as you used to be, and your hair is getting gray at the temples."

"And so you think I have overstayed my market, eh?"

"Well, I won't exactly say that—for, really, some girls are great fools."

"Thank you excessively, gracious Princess!" and Bryant laughed heartily. "Commend me to my greatest friends for home truths! So you think no woman, not an utter fool, could care for me now?" and perhaps, although he laughed, Valentine was just a little bit piqued, for a man's vanity never grows old, whatever his looks may do.

But Marion Challenger made it all right again by telling him that if he were to marry she would be perfectly inconsolable.

"And you would hate my wife, I suppose?"

"Inveterately! But of course I should call upon her, and ask you both to dinner,—once, at any rate."

"How like a woman! Make your mind easy, Princess. I do not mean to burden myself, or you either, with a Mrs. Bryant. One has but to look round the world to see what an utter mistake marriage is."

"Yes, indeed!" she assented, with a deep-fetched sigh, at which Tom Challenger, who was

a good, honest, simple-minded fellow, looked up from his paper and laughed :

"Come, come, Marion! that's a bit rough on me, don't you think? Bryant will believe I am a tyrant."

"No, I don't, you lucky dog; I only look upon you as the one fortunate exception that proves the rule," answered Valentine, with ready gallantry.

This kind of conversation had often taken place between them, and Marion Challenger came at last to have a fixed and unshaken faith in her friend's resolution to end his days as a bachelor.

"You are too sensible!" she would say to him, with the wisdom of feminine flattery, whilst in her heart she added secretly, "and much too selfish! You wouldn't give up one of your comfortable habits, my friend, or abandon one of your cherished customs, for the sake of any woman on the face of the earth!" And she was very glad of it, for she knew that marriage puts an extinguisher forever upon a man's pleasantest friendships, and notably and above all others upon those that he has formed with his friends' wives; and, as Bryant was entirely of

her opinion, they never had any differences upon this subject.

On the evening in question, Bryant found himself at dinner, one of a small party of eight persons. There were two married couples, and a smart little widow, a great friend of Mrs. Challenger's, who openly said that she had no intention of marrying again; yet Marion, with her usual tact, did not even permit this lady, a Mrs. Stourton, to sit next to him at dinner, lest it should be said, however jestingly, that she desired to make up a match between her two friends. The smallness of the party, however, precluded all save general conversation. Marion understood her world too well to give dinners of more than eight or ten people; anything over that number, she was wont to aver, was no longer to be dignified with the name of society. A party of eighteen or twenty people crammed tightly round a table where no one can speak to anybody save his immediate neighbors, and where often there is scarcely elbow-room for the manipulation of one's knife and fork, is nothing but an insult to intelligent people. If Mrs. Challenger could help it, she never dined twice at a house where such an entertainment was

offered to her. To be fed in this wholesale fashion, to be one of a multitude who swallow their food in weariness and discomfort and then hurry away as quickly as possible with a feeling of relief at the conclusion of the tedious ceremony, did not commend itself at all to her taste. Such banquets, where the only object of the givers is to "do off" in a lump as large a number of persons as possible to whom they "owe dinners," with little personal trouble, and with no forethought as to the suitability of the guests to one another, are but grotesque and painful travesties upon the sacred and genial name of Hospitality.

Marion's pleasant dining-room would have held eighteen guests had she chosen to do things in this style,—for London dining-rooms, even in small houses, are curiously elastic,—but nothing would have induced her to invite so many people at a time. To-night the little party was, as usual, well selected and harmonious one to the other; there was plenty of room for the ladies' silk and satin trains round their chairs, and nobody's elbow was jammed into his neighbor's side. The chatter soon flowed freely and continuously around and across the oval table,

for although there was an abundance of flowers and of silver and glass, all of the best, upon it, there was no dividing hedge-row or shrubbery of ferns or palms to impede the free circulation of eyes and of tongues. Valentine occupied the place he liked best, at his hostess's left hand: he generally sat there, and would have considered himself slightly aggrieved if she had failed to give it to him.

The dinner was a success, the champagne excellent, the ladies were all pretty and well dressed, and the men all knew how to talk and to make themselves agreeable. Towards the end, when the jellies and creams were being handed, the conversation had broken up a little into couples, and it was in the midst of a disquisition upon the ultimate influence of Ibsen's plays upon the English drama with the lady on his left hand, that Valentine caught a few words of the conversation on the opposite side of the table, and gathered that Berkshire, and that particular corner of it in which he had spent a Sunday a week ago, were being talked about. He allowed his interest in Ibsen's plays to languish a little, and listened. Presently Mrs. Stourton, who was talking, caught his eye.

"Do you know Berkshire at all, Mr. Bryant?" she inquired across the table.

Bryant admitted that he did, a little.

"Ah, I wonder, then, if you ever heard of a man called Kirby, who lives in the neighborhood I was mentioning? I assure you"—turning towards her host—"that there is a story down in those parts that is a positive romance, Mr. Challenger. Talk about three-volume novels—why, if there was a novelist here to-night, which there is not——"

"Thank God for all his mercies!" ejaculated Challenger, with fervent piety.

"Well, I can only say, if there were, he or she would give their eyes for this story. The plot is a veritable shilling startler!"

"Pray let us hear it, Florence," said Marion.

"Well, it seems that this man Kirby lives in great seclusion at a place called Hillside—ever heard of it, Mr. Bryant?"

"I think I have," replied Bryant, cautiously, looking down fixedly at the bread he was crumbling, so as not to betray by his eyes the eager interest he experienced. That Sunday at Hillside! Only a week ago! yet how far away it seemed! How dream-like and faint now were

those strange emotions and impressions that day had awakened in him! Only to-day his clerk had told him that he had posted a copy of the proposed marriage settlements to Hillside, and he himself had resumed all his business-like sensations on the matter, just as though he had not drunk brown sherry after lunch which he believed to have been drugged, and as though beautiful Enid Fairfax had not entreated him to be her friend. What were these people to him, after all? just clients in the way of business,—a girl about to be married to the son of her guardian, whom he would probably never see again.

Now he found himself listening with an almost breathless interest to Mrs. Stourton's story, and all the oddness of these people, the vague suspicions, the disquieting distrust, the baffled comprehension, that he had experienced under Mr. Kirby's roof a week ago, came crowding back upon him once more.

"Well," Mrs. Stourton was saying, "this man has, they say, a most beautiful niece or ward living with him; she is heiress to fabulous wealth, and is as beautiful as Venus. Once, and once only, has the profane eye of mortal

man been permitted to gaze upon this prodigy: last January her jailer actually took her to the hunt ball! After this one glimpse of her by the county, she was shut up again, more rigorously than ever, like a princess of a fairy-story in a tower, at Hillside House. Her ogre of a guardian is afraid now of any man seeing her; he never leaves home for a day, for fear of her running away; they say he had no idea what an impression she would create till he saw the men crowding round her in the ball-room, and then he got frightened lest any of them should come a-wooing; and he swears she shall never be let out again, because—and here comes the pith of the whole story—because it is his object to secure her money by marrying her to his own son, who is in the last stages of a perfectly hopeless consumption.”

Then Bryant did look up, and that with such a start that he could no longer completely conceal his intense interest in Mrs. Stourton's story.

“I don't believe it!” he cried, with excitement. “It cannot be the case. I happen to know that the younger Mr. Kirby is well enough to be away from home occasionally and to attend to

business. If he were dying, how could he travel about?"

"Oh! so you know the story too, do you, Mr. Bryant? Well, then, it is you who have got hold of the wrong end of it. That is what old Kirby says to everybody. Nobody ever sees the son; he is always, according to his father, 'away on business;' but my informant tells me he is really shut up in the upper part of the house, and is only able to crawl out round the garden now and then on fine days, and is, poor creature, the most pitiful object altogether. His father's sole object is to keep him alive till he can get him married to the girl, so as to keep her money in the family."

"But surely, Mrs. Stourton, you cannot be correctly informed; the young lady, I have been told, is excessively in love with her guardian's son, and even if he be delicate——"

"She is nothing of the sort!" interrupted the widow, with a little warmth. "How can any woman who is young and beautiful be in love with a consumptive moribund? the poor girl *hates* him, I believe, positively *hates* him! She is being forced into this marriage, which is perfectly repulsive to her, simply and solely because

she has no friends in the world to take her part, and she is frightened to death of her jailer—I mean her guardian!”

“Why, Mrs. Stourton, you haven’t half made out your three-volume novel!” here cried Challenger, gayly; “you have given us a heroine in distress, but where is the hero who is going to rescue this imprisoned maiden? You can’t have a novel without a hero!”

“Oh, I am not at all sure that there isn’t a hero ready to hand,” she answered, nodding her head significantly. “I have my suspicions.”

“Oh, do tell us about the hero!” begged one of the other ladies.

“I am not at liberty to mention his name; besides, I believe him to be only a hero in embryo as yet; but he is young, handsome, popular, and enthusiastic, and”—fixing her eyes mischievously upon Valentine—“I should say that he is not wholly and entirely a stranger to Mr. Bryant.”

And Bryant felt more annoyed and troubled by this last remark than by anything else that she had said.

CHAPTER IV.

"AND pray how came you to know all about those people in Florence Stourton's queer story?" inquired Mrs. Challenger of him, when at a later hour, in his character of privileged friend of the house, he found himself in the smoking-room after the other guests had left, discussing a nocturnal cigar with his host before wishing him good-night.

"Mr. Kirby of Hillside happens to be a client of mine," replied Bryant, quietly.

"Then of course you know all about him?—very much better than Florence, probably."

"Very probably," he answered, dryly.

"That only proves, my dear," interpolated Tom Challenger, sententiously, "the truth of what I am always telling you: when you tell a story publicly you should never mention names. Half the mischief that you women make in the world is done by mentioning names and giving up authorities.—Am I not right, Val?"

"Perfectly, my dear fellow."

"I stand reproved," said Marion, gayly, "on account of Florence's sins this time, not my own. But just consider how dull it would be in this world if nobody talked gossip and scandal and nobody mentioned names! We should all be bored to death! Anyhow, Tom, she did not mention everybody by name in her story. Who, for instance, is the hero, whom you are supposed to know, Valentine?"

"As we are alone, I don't mind telling you both in confidence that I believe Mrs. Stourton was alluding to my young cousin Arthur Conway, who was hunting in that part of Berkshire all last winter, and it is he, no doubt, who has furnished her with certain details concerning the Kirbys of Hillside, out of which she has cleverly woven such a very exciting and thrilling little romance."

"Then you think there is not a word of truth in the whole story?"

"Not a word, I should say," answered Valentine, as he rose and knocked off the ash of his cigar into a dainty little china saucer on the mantel-shelf.

"Is Mr. Arthur Conway all that Florence describes him to be?" inquired Marion, thought-

fully. "Is he 'young, handsome, popular, and enthusiastic'?"

"Well, I dare say you ladies would call him so," Bryant admitted, somewhat grudgingly.

"Then why on earth have you never introduced him to me?"

Valentine tossed back his head and laughed; the question seemed to restore his ruffled equanimity. "*Pas si bête*, Princess!" he cried, merrily. "Do you suppose I want a good-looking young scapegrace like Arthur to step into my shoes in this house?" And he looked so bright and handsome and vigorous, in spite of his forty years and his gray-sprinkled hair, that Marion might well have been pardoned for the little extra warmth of affection which she threw into her fervent answer:

"No one could do that, Valentine. I never throw over my oldest and best friends for new ones."

"Well, my dear," here remarked Tom, seriously, for Tom was practical, and not given to enthusiasms, "Valentine will have to find a substitute for you during the month of May. Have you told him that we are going away?"

"No. Fancy my forgetting our great news!

You know that Tom has been talking about taking a month's holiday. Well, it is settled all at once that we are to have the month of May, and as soon as he can arrange matters at the office we are to start; and we are going—where, do you think?—to the Italian Lakes and to Venice! the dream of my whole life! Is it not delightful? But, oh, how I wish you could come with us! Do take a holiday and come too!—oh, do!”

“Yes, why on earth shouldn't you, Val?” echoed Challenger, heartily. “You never have a real good change; you were in town all last August. I really think you ought to get right away abroad now and then; a month in Italy would do you all the good in the world.”

“My dear children,” laughed Bryant, “your innocence is positively refreshing! you are prating of impossibilities! How do you suppose a hard-worked man like myself is to get away for a whole month at the very beginning of the season? Do you know the amount of business I have to get through between this and June? But I am delighted to think you are going to have such a charming holiday, although of course I shall miss you abominably and long

for your return. How soon do you start? I must come and see you off at Charing Cross."

A little more than a week later he was carrying this promise into effect.

Challenger had obtained his leave even earlier than he anticipated, and, as Marion's preparations were soon made, there was nothing to prevent their starting at once.

Bryant dined with them the evening before they started, and became unduly melancholy over the parting. The servants were all to go away for holidays, and the house was to be given over to painters and paperers during their absence.

"I foresee that the holiday will extend itself from one month to two," he said lugubriously to Marion, whose excitement and high spirits almost angered him. "It's too bad of you to go and leave me!"

"Don't be foolish! you will learn my value all the better for being without me for a little while, and of course we shall only be gone four weeks: Tom can't be away for longer. Only, for heaven's sake, don't go getting into mischief during my absence!"

"Mischief? what kind of mischief do you suppose I shall fall into?"

"Oh, some horrid woman might get hold of you and marry you out of hand, just to spite me!"

"Really, my dear Princess, you have not only a most vivid imagination, but also an exceedingly poor opinion of my intelligence! Do you take me for a fool, for a miserable brainless imbecile, that you suppose me capable of being 'got hold of,' as you call it?"

"Well, you know, Valentine, men are very weak, and girls are very sly: one never knows. I am always afraid of your tumbling into some snare or other, if I am not there to keep you straight!"

"Pray don't be anxious on that score. I am forty years of age, and I have lived out most of those years with my eyes open. You know," he added, more seriously, "that I never mean to marry; I have told you my reasons very often. My life is a happy one: I have my work, my position in my profession, my own pleasures and pursuits; why should I hamper myself and cripple my existence with a wife, who would probably interfere with everything that I like best, and who would certainly cost me a great deal and bore me to extinction? As for female

society, and the refinements of a lady's house, what do I want better than *you*, Princess Marion, and the restful security of No. 25 Halkin Street, so long as its hospitable doors are open to me?"

Tom Challenger did not happen to be present when Bryant had this little farewell chat with his wife after dinner, and, perhaps all unwittingly, Bryant threw into the words a shade more of tender regard than usual, by reason of that excellent man's absence; for, as Marion often said on the subject, "three is very good company, but two is infinitely better," and certainly the two friends had many thoughts and sympathies in common which did not interest Tom particularly. Marion was much touched by Bryant's last words, and held out her hand impulsively to thank him, and there was something almost like tears in her eyes as she said to him,—

"You think far too well of me, Valentine. Perhaps I ought not to be so selfish about you, for, of course, if marriage were to mean your real happiness, I suppose I ought not dissuade you from it; much as I should dislike it, I would try and be kind——"

"My dear friend, I am sure you would. But,

as a matter of fact, I am too old to marry. I have enjoyed my liberty too long. Besides, I could not fall in love now. Men either take that disease very young and very violently, or else they outlive the age of it and do not take it at all; and I am of opinion that if a man marries a woman from any other motive on earth save only because he loves her so dearly that he feels he cannot continue to live for lack of her, then that motive is a bad one, and his marriage is no honor to him, but only a disgrace."

Bryant had never spoken quite so seriously about it before, and when he parted with the Challengers the next morning at Charing Cross, Marion went off on her journey with the most untroubled serenity of mind on his account. No dreadful strange wife, whom she could regard only as an interloper, would, she felt assured, come between herself and her friend during her absence. The earnest words he had said on the subject last night had completely lulled her anxieties to rest. Her only regret was at leaving him for so long, bereft of her society, and of her good dinners that he would miss so dreadfully, she thought, with a sigh.

"You ought to have come with us, old man!"

said Tom, as he wrung Bryant's hand in farewell before jumping into the railway carriage. "How on earth am I to manage the Princess without your assistance, I should like to know? You really are an ass not to have chucked up your work and come too."

It was not very long before Valentine wished that he had done so, from the very bottom of his heart.

After the Challengers' departure, he settled down to his usual life,—hard work from morning to night, with pleasant dinners either at the club or at his friends' houses, to wind up the labors of the day, then generally a quiet smoke before he turned in at a moderately early hour for the night.

He had a great deal of business on hand, and the small matter of Miss Fairfax's marriage settlement was soon disposed of. His head clerk took the deed down to Hillside for signature in due course, and he supposed that by and by an invitation to be present at the wedding—which he should certainly decline—would as a matter of politeness be sent to him by Mr. Kirby.

Needless to say, Mrs. Stourton's fanciful story

about James Kirby's condition had no value in his eyes. From the moment he divined her authority he ceased to attach the smallest importance to it; for his young cousin had frequently caused him a great deal of trouble, and he had no belief in him at all. Arthur Conway was reckless and extravagant, two qualities with which the serious-minded Valentine had no sympathy whatever. Having come into a considerable fortune at his father's death at the early age of twenty-one, Arthur had been doing his best to dissipate that fortune by racing, gambling, and general extravagance ever since, much to the grief of his mother, who was always appealing to her nephew to help her son out of his numerous difficulties. It was small wonder, perhaps, that young Conway, who seemed to exist only in order to be to him a thorn in the flesh, should be no favorite with Bryant. That he was handsome, agreeable, and exceedingly popular with the fair sex, was no recommendation in the eyes of the hard-working and sober-going middle-aged cousin, whom Arthur for his part looked upon as a strict and disagreeable old foggy.

Bryant's chambers in Lincoln's Inn Fields

were among the most commodious and well-appointed bachelor quarters to be found in that time-honored and classic district.

On arriving at his door on the second floor up the stone staircase, the visitor found himself received into a small square vestibule or entrance-hall. The clerk's office was to the left of the door opening into a small office appertaining to Mr. Peters, Bryant's confidential clerk, who was also in some measure his personal attendant, and who was accustomed to stay later than the others, in order to wait upon him. On the opposite side of the hall was Bryant's private study, fitted up in the usual severe style of a room devoted to business, with a heavy mahogany writing-table in front of the fireplace, littered over with papers, and with dark bookcases filled with law-books, and ranges of boxes, crammed with parchment deeds, lining the walls on three sides of it, from floor to ceiling. It was here he received his clients. But in addition to this office there was yet another room, opening out of the first, which was consecrated to the indulgence of all his own particular hobbies and tastes; this constituted his actual home, and here he really lived his happiest hours, either

alone or in the company of some intimate and chosen friend. This room was comfortably, even luxuriously, furnished; pictures of considerable merit covered the walls; rare china, priceless old silver "bits," twinkled from behind the glass doors of Chippendale corner-cupboards; valuable bronze and marble statuettes stood on brackets and on the mantel-shelf; while there was not in the whole room a single piece of furniture that had not been bought from some well-known collection, and that was not worthy of a careful examination. Bryant had spent a good deal of money, first and last, upon this room, and, as he had great taste in matters of decoration and artistic arrangement, the result amply repaid the care and time he had devoted to it. It was a delightful room, and he was justly proud and fond of it. Many times he had here entertained Marion Challenger and her husband at tea, and at least once every year they were accustomed to dine with him. There were in consequence certain additional traces of feminine fingers here and there, in matters of Indian embroidered draperies and deeply-frilled satin cushions, that could have been inspired only by a woman's taste. Bryant's sanctum, in

fact, without deviating in the least from what a man's room ought to be, did not present that cold formality of outline or that comfortless austerity of detail which a man's unaided efforts are wont to impart to it. Behind this delightful room, curtained off by a heavy portière from the rest of the premises, were Valentine's bedroom and bath-room, so that the portion of his residence in which he lived was divided completely from the business department in which his clerks worked,—the study where he received his clients and did his own work forming the passage of communication between the two. It may be added that there was a separate door from a back staircase of the house, giving access to the larger office, so that no noise of the arrival or departure of his employees could penetrate to the solicitor's ears or disturb him when he was at work. Peters, only, came and went by the door he used himself.

It has been necessary to give a somewhat detailed description of Mr. Bryant's chambers in order that the events that happened on a certain evening, now about to be related, may be fully understood.

Valentine had been dining at the Oxford and

Cambridge Club with a small party of friends. It happened to be one of those wet nights to which the variable climate of England is prone, and on which the getting home after dinner with a dry skin is a matter of serious difficulty. The rain as he left Pall Mall descended in torrents, and he had trouble in getting a cab at all. There were, indeed, scarcely any to be seen in the streets, even in the vicinity of the clubs, and none at all in the neighborhood of Lincoln's Inn. When he dismissed his hansom at his own door, he had to give the man an extra shilling, for, as he grumblingly said, it was not a night for a dog to be out in.

He got very wet even running across the pavement into the shelter of the open doorway, and a long stream of drippings from his overcoat marked his track up the draughty stone staircase to the landing of his own chambers.

It was barely half-past eleven, for Bryant, mindful of his next day's work, never cared to sit up late; he came briskly up the staircase, thankful to be home, out of the inclemency of the weather, and thrust his latch-key into his door. As he did so, however, the door was

opened simultaneously from within, and he found that Peters was sitting up for him.

Now, Peters did not sleep on the premises; he usually went away to his home after his master had gone out to his dinner, as soon as he had made the rooms tidy; for he combined, as has been said, the office of valet and servant with his other vocations.

"Halloo, Peters! here still?" cried Bryant, in some surprise, and then, seeing a queer look of mystery and trouble in the old man's face, he added, quickly, "Has anything gone wrong?"

"Well, sir," and Peters closed the door softly behind him, and lowered his voice almost to a whisper, "I thought perhaps I had better wait up and tell you myself, in case it should be an unpleasant shock for you——"

"Why, what the devil is the matter?"

"Well, sir, I am sure I hope you won't blame me—but there is a lady waiting to see you."

CHAPTER V.

"A LADY!" repeated Bryant, in the blankest dismay, "at this hour of night! Good God, Peters, why did you let her in? Why didn't you say that I can't attend to business at night?"

"I did say so, sir, over and over again, but it made no sort of difference to her; she said her business was most important, and that she must wait till you came in. I begged of her to call again to-morrow, but she wouldn't so much as listen to me; she said you would not mind her stopping, and that she didn't care how long she waited, so long as she saw you. She has been here ever since nine o'clock," added Peters, almost piteously. "I didn't like to leave her by herself, in case she might be one of them lady thieves as goes about and carries off the silver; I thought it my duty to remain till you came in."

Bryant was divesting himself of his wet overcoat. He was very much annoyed with Peters for allowing any client, more especially a woman, to go into his rooms at night, and he frowned heavily, whilst the corners of his lips assumed a

certain stern deflection with which Peters was familiar.

"You are certainly very much to blame," he said, with displeasure, "and I trust you will never let such a thing happen again on any pretext whatever. However, I dare say it is only my aunt, Mrs. Conway."

Peters was the soul of discretion, but at these words he put up his hand to his face, and the ghost of a smile which he respectfully endeavored to conceal flitted across his solemn features.

"I don't think it is your aunt, sir," he said, dryly.

Valentine was in no hurry to encounter the unknown invader. There were several letters that had come by post lying on the hall table, and he proceeded to open them leisurely; the lady, whoever she was, must wait his convenience. He had a great many ladies among his clients, none of them young or handsome, and he considered that whoever this particular lady might be, she ought at any rate to know better than to invade him after business hours and to remain until the middle of the night in his chambers. It was unconscionable.

"If you please, sir," said Peters's voice be-

hind him, "if you do not want me any longer, I shall be glad to go home. My wife is poorly to-night, and if you could manage about getting the lady a cab——?"

"Oh, yes, yes, of course," answered Valentine, with more impatience than he usually showed to his inferiors. "Go home, certainly; I can get the lady a cab perfectly."

He was, in fact, rather anxious to get the old man out of the way: whatever the mystery of this lady might turn out to be, he felt that he had just as soon be alone to unravel it.

Peters went away quickly and thankfully, and he heard the hollow echo of his footsteps as they died away down the stone staircase outside; if he had seen him chuckling to himself all the way down, he might have been less glad to be relieved of his presence.

It was odd how his heart suddenly began to beat when he found himself alone, face to face with the necessity of tackling the intruder. He entered his study: the room was empty, and it increased his annoyance when he gathered from the sight of the half-open door of the room beyond that this audacious woman had actually penetrated into his own sanctum.

He lifted the portière curtain and went in.

The slight figure of a woman was seated in his favorite arm-chair close to the shaded lamp on the table. She had found herself a book, and was reading. At his entrance she looked up quickly and rose to her feet. For the first bewildered moment he hardly recognized her; he only saw that she was young and infinitely lovely; then remembrance came back to him, and he knew her.

"Miss Fairfax! *you!*" he exclaimed, thunder-struck at the sight of her.

"Yes, it is I." And she smiled and held out her hand. "Are you very much surprised to see me, Mr. Bryant?"

"Very much indeed," he answered, emphatically, coming forward into the light without noticing her outstretched hand, and as she saw his face more fully she perceived that he was not only surprised, but exceedingly disturbed, at the sight of her.

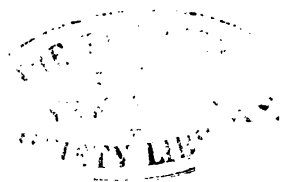
"I hope you will forgive my waiting to see you," she said, apologetically. "You see, I am in great trouble, and you promised—you even swore it on your honor, if you remember—that you would be my friend."

"Miss Fairfax," said Bryant, very seriously, "you ought not to be here. Do you know the hour? Why did you not wait till to-morrow to see me? Of course I am your friend, I hope always to be so, but you must see for yourself that you have taken a very extraordinary step. Is your guardian in town? The best thing you can do, I think, is to go straight back to him in a cab at once, and if you will come again in the morning I will give you the very best assistance that I can. Besides, I cannot discuss business now; it is too late; the first thing to be done is to take you back to Mr. Kirby's protection."

"You don't understand. I cannot go to him: he is not in London. I have run away."

"What!" almost shouted Bryant, and then he remained staring hopelessly at her. "You have run away? Do you mean that he does not know that you have left Hillside?"

"He probably knows it by now," replied Enid, tranquilly, "but he would not be able to follow me to-night: he had to go into Reading this afternoon, and he was not expected back till seven o'clock, and there is no later train to town."



"But, good heavens, Miss Fairfax, do you realize the position in which you have placed yourself?" cried Valentine, with ever-increasing dismay.

"It is a very unfortunate position, I admit," said Enid, sorrowfully, "but it is not half so bad as the position I have been in for the past week. Oh, Mr. Bryant!" she cried, clasping her hands together with sudden passion, "save me from those men! If you knew what I have gone through! if you knew what I have suffered at their hands!"

"Those men? You mean Mr. Kirby?"

"I mean Mr. Kirby and his son."

"His son? the man you are going to marry?"

"I will not marry him!" she cried, almost frantically, wringing her hands together and pacing about the room like a beautiful caged animal. "It may be wicked, it may be inhuman on my part,—Mr. Kirby says it is,—but I cannot bring myself to it."

"My dear young lady," said Bryant, very seriously, "pray sit down again. Try and be calm and tell me what has happened. I confess that what you say fills me with amazement. I imagined from what your guardian told me that

your marriage was to be one entirely of affection."

"Of affection! Good heavens!" she cried, sinking back into the chair he had pushed forward to her: "why, poor James is so ill he cannot move without help. I don't believe he will live a month. I pity him from the bottom of my heart, but I cannot feel any affection for him; it makes me shudder to go near him, and when he takes my hand and tries to draw my face down to his—oh!" and she covered her face shrinkingly with her hands.

"But was he not away on business the day I was with you?"

"Oh, no; he was up-stairs in bed all the time." (So Mrs. Stourton's story was true after all!) "Mr. Kirby did not, of course, want you to see him," she continued; "he looks so terrible, poor fellow, and his cough is dreadful to hear! I ought to pity him,—I do, indeed I do, —but I cannot, cannot marry him! the mere thought fills me with loathing."

"I should think so. But why did you not tell me all this while I was at Hillside?"

"I tried to. But you know what happened. He would not give me a chance. He knew I

would appeal to you, so he put something in that sherry to make you drowsy. I tried to wake you up, but you could not understand me, and then he came in, and it was too late, and he turned me out of the room."

"But this is really terrible, Miss Fairfax. The man must be a devil!"

"He is, I believe. All this last week he has shut me up in my room; I have been half starved. It was done to make me marry that poor dying creature before my birthday."

"Before you are of age?" said Bryant, sharply. "When will that be?"

"I shall be twenty-one to-morrow, and every day this week he has been trying to drag me to the church, where that poor half deaf and nearly blind clergyman, whom he has hoodwinked completely, was to marry us,—and this morning was the last chance. I would not go, and I believe he would have beaten me till he half killed me to-night. He said he would."

"My poor child, how terrible! Could you not have written to me, or to some other friend?"

"I have only one other friend; but I could not have sent a letter by post: my door was

locked, and the servants were paid to spy upon me. No, my only plan was to escape. When I found out that he had gone away for the afternoon I got out by my bedroom window; I tied the sheets together and let myself down into the garden while he was out and the servants were all at dinner. It is not very high up. I threw my bag out first, and then I got down without hurting myself. I walked all the way to the station. Luckily I had a little money in my purse. My one object was to get to you. I knew I should be safe with you, because you are a lawyer and will know what to do to take care of me."

Bryant was silent for a moment. Her absolute faith in him touched him, at the same time that her entire innocence and ignorance of the world filled him with perplexity. In truth, the position in which she had placed him was a sufficiently embarrassing one, and already he foresaw all the difficulties and annoyances she was likely to cause him.

"My dear Miss Fairfax," he said, at length, "I assure you that you have my deepest sympathy, and I will serve you to the best of my ability, but it seems to me that the only thing

to be considered at this moment is what you are to do to-night. Do you know any lady in town to whom you could go?"

She shook her head. "I do not know any women at all; my only friend is a man, and he is quite young: that is why I came to you. I thought," she added, naively, "that, as you were old, it would not signify." The word made him wince; he did not like it. He looked at her oddly: was she laughing at him? Not in the least. Her face was quite serious. Did she really think him "old," then?—too old to know that she was beautiful? He was angry with her for a moment, and then suddenly the hot blood danced in his veins, and every pulse of his being tingled with a new excitement. Too old, indeed! too old for life and love and the rapture of a woman's kiss? Oh, if she only knew!

He gave a short, bitter laugh that startled her. Mrs. Challenger, he remembered, had thought him old too! Ah! Mrs. Challenger! Why on earth had she gone away? She was the one woman in the world who would have been of the most use to him, who could have helped him out of this predicament: by what fatality was it that she had been spirited away to

the other side of Europe just at this unlucky moment!

“What cursed bad luck!” he groaned between his teeth. What was he to do?

He remembered the hour,—the clock on the mantel-piece was striking twelve,—the torrents of rain without, the scarcity of cabs. Where was he to take this girl, all by herself, with no other luggage than the small bag which reposed on the table in front of him? What hotel could she go to? what lodging-house would receive her without supicion? There was only one thing to be done. He had friends who lived close by, with whom he himself must take refuge; he must go and knock up some man he knew, and make some excuse; he must say that the rain was coming in through the ceiling and dripping on his bed,—that would do as well as anything else. Out he must go,—there was no help for it, and Enid Fairfax must be left in undivided possession of the citadel she had so ruthlessly stormed. He left the room with a muttered excuse; she seemed quite surprised when he came back presently with his waterproof coat and hat, carrying a small gladstone bag.

"Why, where are you going?" she asked him, in all innocence, and then Bryant answered her, impatiently and irritably, "Do you not see? I am going out. I cannot stay here. You may think me old,—I dare say I am; I am forty. But even such a burden of years as that would not prevent the world from casting a slur on your reputation were it to be told that you had remained with me, here in my rooms, until the morning."

The words were brutal, and almost coarse: the moment he had spoken them he was cursing himself for a beast to have said them.

A hot wave of color flooded her lovely face; a sense of shame unutterable swept over her; her whole form drooped and swayed as though under a bodily blow.

"Oh, I will go—I will go!" she wailed. "I did not think——"

"I am a brute!" he cried, hoarsely. "For God's sake forgive me; I did not mean it. I know, my dear, that you only look upon me as a stupid old legal fogy." He took her hands in his,—he drew her towards him; for one moment she wept, and her fair head sank upon his shoulder. With a strange new tenderness, he

stroked her soft silky hair with a trembling hand. "Was that not it? My dear child," he went on, brokenly, "forgive me for my cruelty: you see, you are so innocent, you don't know what wicked things people say about nothing at all; but it does not do to set the world's opinion at defiance, and so I must go; I have a friend two doors off who will take me in. It is no trouble to me at all, I assure you, and I must beg of you to make yourself as comfortable as you can in my quarters. I will send in a nice respectable old woman to you in the morning; she is my clerk's wife, Mrs. Peters; she will take you for my niece,—that is what I shall tell her. She will look after you, and bring you some tea, and then when you are quite rested I will come and see you, and we will talk over matters together and see what is best to be done."

And so he left her soothed and comforted by his kind words, and went out again into the wet night. And then Enid, utterly worn out in body and mind, rolled herself up in her travelling cloak, and, throwing herself down on the sofa, fell fast asleep almost immediately.

CHAPTER VI

It was twelve o'clock, and Enid Fairfax had been within an appreciable distance of sleeping the clock round.

She was up now, and felt refreshed and rested. Mrs. Peters had brought her an early cup of tea, and later on had assisted her to make such amount of dressing and renovation of toilet as the modest dimensions of her luggage admitted.

"And now, miss, if you will go into the next room," said the old lady, in conclusion, "I will let your uncle know that you are ready."

Enid went back into the sanctum, where she had slept upon the sofa, but everything now looked different from what it had appeared to her last night in the lamp-light. The windows were wide open, and a flood of noonday sunshine poured into the room; the air, after the drenching rain of the night, was fresh and balmy, and a little breeze came fluttering straight from heaven's blue into the solicitor's rooms.

A small table that had been drawn up near

the window was covered with a table-cloth, and upon it a meal was laid out which partook more of the nature of lunch than breakfast; a cold chicken, something hot under a silver cover, a bottle of hock, and some delicious-looking chocolate cakes, was the fare provided for her; and Enid, who since yesterday had eaten nothing but a dry crust of bread and a cup of milk which she had swallowed before she fled from her room at Hillside, felt positively famished as her eyes lit upon these dainty preparations. There was in addition a bunch of spring flowers upon the table, in a deep ruby glass vase, while a little knot of sweet-smelling violets was laid among the snowy folds of her table-napkin.

At this moment Bryant came into the room by the opposite door.

He greeted her with a smile and an outstretched hand. He thought that she was 'as fresh and sweet to look at as the morning itself.

"Well, have you slept well? Are you rested?" he asked, looking keenly and admiringly into her lovely face. There was no trace in words or manner of the annoyance he had betrayed last night. Probably he had told himself that, the worst having been tided over, he should now be

able to extricate himself and her with no further difficulty from a somewhat delicate position.

"Sit down and have something to eat," he said, leading her to the table. "You must be very hungry, for I dare say you did not have much dinner before you left Hillside."

"I am positively starved," she answered, as she sat down and lifted the little bunch of violets to her nose. "Dinner? Why, I have forgotten what dinners are like. It is more than a week since I have been allowed anything but dry bread!"

"Good God!" ejaculated Bryant below his breath. This detail concerning Mr. Kirby's persecution of her struck him as infinitely more appalling than anything else she had told him. No dinner! The world might come to an end, before Valentine Bryant would forego his dinner!

"How truly awful!" he said, with unfeigned horror. "For heaven's sake, begin to eat at once, instead of smelling those violets." And he proceeded to help her to something of a non-descript appearance but of a deliciously savory flavor out of the hot dish in front of him.

"Mr. Bryant, you are a magician! Who

cooks for you? Is it the old woman who came to help me this morning? Where is her kitchen? She must be a perfect genius."

"My dear Miss Fairfax, in Lincoln's Inn Fields there is neither cooking nor keeping of cooks. Everything you see before you is brought in ready from a French restaurant in Holborn, without which the unlucky bachelors in these wilds would be in a far worse plight than they are."

"And the flowers? do they come too from the restaurant with the food?"

"Not exactly. Miss Fairfax, I have not forgotten that it is your twenty-first birthday——"

"Oh, how good you are!" cried Enid, gratefully, and straightway she pinned the violets into her dress close under her little pointed chin, so that it nestled down lovingly into the dewy sweetness of the flowers every time she bent her head.

Valentine caught himself looking at those violets with a pleasure that was not purely artistic. "Happy flowers that kiss so fair a face!" he thought, and then, remembering that she had placed them there because they were his gift, there came over him a glow of well-

being and content to which he was totally unaccustomed.

"You must not suppose," he said, aloud, "that we lawyers have feasts of this nature every morning of our lives; a sandwich and a glass of sherry is usually all the lunch I have time for; but when a young lady of property comes of age under my roof, what can I do but kill the fatted calf in her honor? and so I despatched my servant to Messrs. Dubois's establishment for a '*déjeuner à la fourchette*' complete."

"You are very good to me," she said once more, this time with a sweet and gracious gravity that sat charmingly upon her young face, and as she spoke she lifted her eyes and looked at him. What eyes she had!—how blue, how deep, how full of soul! He caught himself wondering if those eyes could be made to fill with tenderness or with passion, and whether there was any man alive who had already the power to conjure up her heart into those heavenly depths. And if not,—if not——!

Then she spoke, cutting short these altogether riotous fancies and speculations:

"Mrs. Peters called you my uncle."

"Did she?" he answered, laughing. "I am

glad she believes in that somewhat lame and incredible theory."

"Do you know," continued Enid, seriously, "I wish very much that you were really my uncle?"

"Do you?" he said, grimly. If a bucket of cold water had been suddenly poured over him, Mr. Bryant could not have fallen more rapidly from heaven to earth.

"I do not feel myself endued with any avuncular qualifications whatever," he said, so stiffly that Enid lifted her eyebrows in surprise, wondering what had offended him.

"I suppose he does not like my wishing to be related to him," she thought, crestfallen, and then lapsed into silence.

He was sorry, for he saw she did not understand him, and he began loading her plate with the chocolate cakes, till she smiled and thanked him, and he felt happy once more.

And all the time the little brown London sparrows were chirruping in the narrow paved court-yard outside, and the sunshine came twinkling in through the leaves of a plane-tree close to the window, throwing tender lights and shadows upon the soft smooth coils of her hair, and

dancing merrily over the silver and glass upon the table, and presently a bee, who must have lost his way from some suburban garden, came humming in through the open casement, and buried himself with a murmur of content among the heavy-scented jonquils and hyacinths in the vase upon the table.

Oh, happy hour! happier than either of them was to realize until long afterwards: not until cruel doubts, and harsh words, and sorrow, had come between them, to make them know the value of its lost sweetness!

"Now we must talk business," said Bryant, at last, when that delightful little banquet had come to an end. "I have not long to spare you, for presently I shall have to go back to my work, so I will tell you in a very few words what I have already done, and what I propose to do for the future. To begin with, Miss Enid, do you understand that being of age to-day, and still unmarried, is a fact which renders you independent of your guardian? At twelve o'clock last night, whilst you and I were talking in this room, your guardian's trusteeship came to an end, and you entered into the sole and uncontrolled possession of your fortune."

"Really? Then is that the reason Mr. Kirby was so very anxious I should marry poor James before my twenty-first birthday?"

"Probably. His wisdom was as that of the serpent. But, fortunately, his trusteeship ended at the moment the clock struck twelve last night; and now you are your own mistress. You are comparatively rich, you have thirty thousand pounds of your own, and your money is all safely invested. You can do exactly as you like with your life; nobody can now force you to do anything against your inclinations; you can do as you please."

"I would rather do as you advise," she said, thoughtfully.

"For the present, at least, I felt sure you would say that; and that is why I have ventured to do something for you this morning without consulting you beforehand."

"Yes?"

"You know, of course, that you cannot stay here," he went on, a little hurriedly and with embarrassment, "not even for an hour longer. For your own sake, and, I may add, for mine also, I must be inhospitable, and turn you out as soon as you can get your bonnet on."

"Yes, I quite understand." She did understand it now, for her color rose; but her eyes wondered dully away out of the window. What was she to do in the wide world, alone without him, her only friend? of what use would her money be to her?

Somehow the sunshine seemed colder and dimmer, and the rustling branches of the plane-tree did but echo the sigh that was in her own heart.

"I would have been a daughter to him if he had let me stay," she thought, not perhaps understanding herself. "What wicked people there must be in the world, who could see harm in it!"

"And so," he went on, "I have taken rooms for you in a lodging-house near Hyde Park. Some friends of mine were there last year, and found them very comfortable. The landlady is a motherly woman, and will thoroughly look after you. I have been there myself this morning and arranged everything. I shall, of course, advance you all the money you require, until your own affairs are settled, and I shall also write to-day to Mr. Kirby to give him your address. I shall tell him that you went yesterday

to this lodging, and that you have consulted me as to your future, and placed the management of your fortune in my hands: you do so, do you not?" he added, with a smile.

"Oh, yes. But—am I to go on living there by myself?"

"That is as you please. I have only taken the rooms for a week at present. I think I should recommend you to advertise for a companion to live with you."

"A companion?" she echoed, startled.

"Yes; some nice middle-aged lady who would go about with you. There are plenty such to be found. You see, Miss Fairfax, you are very young and inexperienced, and you know very little about the value of money; you might easily be cheated and imposed upon on all sides. Besides, if you will excuse my saying so, you are far too—too pretty to live by yourself."

How inadequate the feeble word "pretty" sounded as applied to her! He was half ashamed to use it. But Enid had no personal vanity: very beautiful women, as a rule, are singularly free from it. She looked up laughingly.

"Am I? So they told me,—all those young men I met when I went to a ball once. Do you know, it does not seem to me that it is a good thing at all to be pretty? My guardian would never let me see anybody again afterwards, for that reason: he said I was too pretty to be allowed to go about. And now you say I am too pretty to live alone, and that I must have a strange woman to take care of me! I do wish I was ugly!" she added, fervently; at which Bryant laughed aloud.

"Well, I don't; not any more than I wish I were your uncle! Our wishes do not seem to coincide, Miss Enid. But now, my dear child," he went on seriously, and with quite a paternal manner, "do not waste any more time: put on your bonnet at once. Peters shall get you a cab, and his wife shall go with you to Albion Street and see you safely there. I shall desire your late guardian to send everything that belongs to you at Hillside there; and here is sufficient money to enable you to get anything you may require meanwhile."

She rose from the table, and he counted the money, notes, gold, and silver, out into the little leather purse which she held out to him; and

whilst they were standing thus close together in friendly proximity upon the hearth-rug, with the disordered luncheon-table behind them,—the two chairs hastily pushed away just as they had risen from them, while the velvet-coated bee was still murmuring his confidences into the yellow hearts of the jonquils,—there happened something so unexpected, so terrible, so tragical, even, that suddenly all this neat little programme which he had so carefully arranged and thought out fell shattered like a pack of cards to the ground, while in a moment, in the twinkling of an eye, swift as lightning, that flashes, strikes, and kills, the whole after-life of these two became changed and altered, so that never, never were they the same to each other any more.

There arose a sudden noise without, an angry voice insisting, a soothing voice expostulating; then a scuffle, and the violent bursting open of a door. The whole thing did not take ten seconds; and there stood Mr. Kirby, purple with rage, and gasping with blind fury in front of them!

“I knew it!—you villain! you profligate! you blackguard!” he shouted, shaking his fist frantically in Bryant’s face.

"Leave the room, Peters, this instant!"

Peters vanished.

"Mr. Kirby, by what right do you force your way into my private room and use such improper and violent language to me?"

"By what right indeed? By what right have you decoyed my ward up to London in order to ruin her?"

The two men stood opposite each other. Bryant was upright, drawn to his full height, and white as death. He turned a cold, stern face upon his accuser. Only a slight nervous twitching of the corners of his lips betrayed the horrible effect these words had upon him.

"If you will listen to me," he began, in a quiet, measured voice that seemed somehow as if it was not his own voice at all, but belonged to some one else, so intense was the vibration of concentrated emotion within him, "I will explain to you that, whatever you may fancy to the contrary, you are entirely mistaken."

"Mistaken!" shouted Kirby, in a voice of thunder; "mistaken in the evidence of my senses? You fool!" suddenly turning round and pointing from the table behind him with a rapid gesture of comprehension to the door of

the inner room beyond, which happened to have been left ajar. "I find you here together, alone, at twelve o'clock in the morning,—you and this wretched, abandoned girl,—this——"

And there followed a terrible scathing word, under which Enid, white as ashes, shrank and cowered back with a cry of agony, bowing her scarlet face in utter shame upon her knees.

Then Valentine Bryant, strong in innocence and in a sense of injustice, and with angry shame for himself and for her, stood up before that cruel slander as archangels are said to stand before defaming devils.

"Be silent!" he said: "do not dare to speak foul words in the presence of this lady, who is as pure as the angels of God Almighty." There was a moment's silence: Bryant's temples throbbed violently. There are times in life when a man does not pause to think or to calculate, when all that is sordid and selfish falls away from him, and when the nobler self, which each of us inherits from his Maker, lifts him for the moment above the baser metal of his earthly nature.

Such a moment it was with Valentine Bryant; and the lie that he uttered was fifty times more

worthy of forgiveness than half the truths that are spoken by the sons of men.

"This lady is my wife," he said, with a strange calmness. "We were married this morning at ten o'clock. This," pointing to the table in the window, "is our wedding-feast, which you have inopportunately interrupted."

CHAPTER VII.

BUT such moments of unnatural exaltation are seldom of long duration. A man may plunge off the parapet of a bridge to rescue a drowning beggar, with the courage of a supreme self-sacrifice, but it is doubtful whether he would have the moral strength to repeat the deed several times running.

Almost before the hansom that carried her away from his door had disappeared round the corner of the square, Valentine Bryant was staring the full meaning of that which he had said in the face; and that which he thus looked at was singularly distasteful to him. He had said very little to her after the summary departure of the still enraged but entirely defeated and baffled Kirby. He had told her briefly to start at once, to go to Albion Street, as he had arranged, and to wait there until she heard from him.

He was, in truth, almost too stunned to speak to her at all: he felt like a man who has had a bad fall and who is wounded and crushed all over.

When she had murmured a few broken words of gratitude to him because he had saved her by what seemed to her a clever trick, he had answered her very coldly, but certainly a little at random,—

“Do not speak about it, please. I could not help myself, and there was nothing else to be done.”

And she did not understand him.

To do him justice, he understood himself perfectly. When he began to recover from the shock a little, he realized that a man of honor cannot speak such a lie to save a woman's reputation, and not do his best to act up to that lie, so that it shall become a truth.

He himself, as well as Enid, had been in an awful predicament, and for his own sake, for the sake of his professional reputation and credit, even more than for her sake, he was bound to get out of that predicament. He was well aware that such a scandal, were it to be spread abroad, would ruin him professionally: the story was too well attested, the evidence against him too damning, not to be believed. Hundreds would believe it; it would get into those abominable society papers, which exist only in order to drag the

miserable secrets on men's private lives into the cruel glare of publicity and distort them to suit a sensational paragraph, and, once there, not all the purity and innocence of a Joseph would be of any avail to whiten his smirched and blackened name. He had always prided himself upon the stainlessness of his morals and the uprightness of his career, and had often said of himself to others, "In my life there are, thank God, no dark corners: the whole world is welcome to sift every action of my past existence." And yet it was he who had been overtaken by this dire calamity.

He intended to marry Enid; he must marry her, in fact, and that with as little delay as possible. Of that primary necessity there was no sort of shadow of doubt in his mind.

After he had married her, then what?

"*Après ça le déluge !*" he said to himself aloud, in the bitterness of his soul. He looked round the peaceful sanctum that was so infinitely dear to him. Peters was clearing away the remains of that fatal meal that had been his undoing: he had even carried the flowers in the ruby vase away out of his sight, and the place had very quickly resumed its habitual sober and yet har-

monious and peaceful aspect. He looked round upon his household gods with an indescribable anguish ; his favorite pictures, his cherished " bits of blue," his dearly-prized Chippendale and buhl, the wide arm-chair where he had often sat reading his pet authors into the small hours in the peaceful silence and security of his bachelorhood, — must he give up all this, relinquish the whole of his life's joys, tear himself from all he loved and valued most on earth, and all because a thoughtless, inconsiderate girl, who was almost a stranger to him, had flung herself with reckless folly into his arms ?

There was a moment after she had gone when he positively hated her ! An hour ago he had been very near to loving her : the glamour of her womanly presence in this inner stronghold of his life, the charm of her great beauty, the very simplicity of her nature, had fascinated him, and had awakened in him something which no woman he had met before had ever called into life. But all that was over now. The events which had followed upon those brief moments of sweetness had roughly and violently destroyed what had been in truth the first frail blossom of a dawning love.

Now, he could only remember that a very terrible thing had befallen him, and that he owed this terrible thing to her.

He was not able to spend much time, however, in brooding over his troubles. He had to go to the Law Courts; there were appointments to be kept, clients to be interviewed and advised, clerks to direct and give orders to; and above all this ordinary work there was another piece of important business that no one could do for him, which it behooved him to set about as quickly as possible.

And yet through it all, all day long, wherever he went, whatever he did, and whatsoever other matters seemed to be occupying his whole attention, there lay at the bottom of his heart a dull, dogged determination not to be altogether worsted and defeated by the cruel destiny which had overtaken him.

"I will do so much, no more," he kept on repeating to himself. "I will do all that is right and just, everything that honor demands of me, but nothing else,—nothing else. Nobody, surely, could expect it of me!"

And thus his thought grew and strengthened within him, until it became perfected

and ripened into a fixed and unalterable decision.

Meanwhile, Enid Fairfax possessed her soul in patience and in solitude in Albion Street. The lodgings were what is called "nice;" that is to say, they were clean and airy and substantially furnished; but to the mind of a refined lady of cultivated tastes can furnished lodgings, especially in London, ever be really "nice"?

Enid found those two ground-floor rooms unspeakably dreadful. She did not believe she could ever feel herself at home in them. She spent her time wandering aimlessly up and down them, fingering the cheap ornaments upon the mantel-piece, altering the arrangement of the chairs with their crochet-work antimacassars, pulling down and putting up again the six-penny Japanese fans upon the walls, with the restlessness of one who has a fever. Often she came to a stand-still in front of the window and stared miserably at the passing traffic of the street, or craned her head round the corner in order to catch a sideways glimpse of the trees in Hyde Park.

At last, tired of expecting and waiting and hoping for she knew not what, she remembered

that she had hardly any clothes with her, that she had money, and that there were shops in the near vicinity of her prison: she remembered, in short, one of woman's supremest consolations. She rang the bell and asked her landlady to tell her of the best shop in the neighborhood where pretty things could be seen and bought.

Mrs. Green promptly recommended Marshall & Snellgrove's, and Enid sallied forth and found her way there.

She was in point of fact in want of many actual necessities, for she did not know when she would receive her boxes from Hillside; so that for about two hours she managed to enjoy herself pretty fairly among the bewildering delights of the large fashionable shop.

Among other things, she bought for herself a ready-made dress which was temptingly displayed upon a stand. It was a simply-made dress of a pale heliotrope color, and it took her fancy. The saleswoman who showed it to her told her that it was a Paris pattern, and persuaded her to try it on. By good fortune it fitted her as though it had been made for her. Then she selected a bonnet to wear with it, and

directed that her purchases should be sent to her to Albion Street.

"I wonder whether he will like it," she thought, as she walked home, not ill pleased with her afternoon's work. "I wish I knew if he is fond of that color. I hope he will think it suits me."

For her thoughts dwelt most incessantly on Valentine, and there was in her mind a vague tremor of expectation concerning her future relations with him, that burned like a fever in her veins.

But when she had unpacked and tried on all her new purchases and put them away carefully in the wardrobe, there fell a great depression of spirits upon her, and the long solitary evening in her dreary rooms, when no message came from Valentine, no word to cheer her, no sign that he remembered her existence, made her realize to the full her utter loneliness in the world.

"Even Arthur Conway and his silly notes would amuse me now," she thought. "What nonsense they were! and yet it was an excitement to go and look for them in the old hollow stump near the holly-bush in the shrubbery."

She unlocked her bag and took a small packet of letters out of an inner pocket,—there were six of them in all,—and as she read them over she smiled a good deal to herself over them. They were, in truth, very exaggerated and boyish effusions.

“Beautiful angel!” began one, “am I never to see you again? How can I penetrate your prison-walls? I dream of you incessantly——” etc., etc.

She read them through one after the other with a certain disgust; they seemed to her now to be utter foolishness; yet at the time she received them she had clung to them desperately, as a drowning man clings to a straw, for so bad had been her case that Arthur Conway and his boyish adoration had seemed to hold out a hope of deliverance which she could not afford to throw away. As she read them again one after the other, she wondered how she had ever cared to receive them; she recalled Arthur’s youthful pink-and-white face, but only to contrast it with another face, stern and rugged, yet filled with power and individuality,—a face that had begun to dominate her whole being.

“And I thought him old and uninteresting!”

she said to herself, with self-abasement, as she tore the silly letters she had hitherto cherished into a hundred fragments and tossed them impetuously into the waste-paper basket.

“Poor Arthur! he wanted to be my friend. He would have helped me if he had known how,” she said to herself, when she had destroyed the last of these relics of a foolish and meaningless episode. “In those days I had no one else in the world, and I did not like to throw the faintest chance of escape away; but now I do not want him: I am free, and I have found a better friend!” And again that other man, with his dark clever face and striking personality, came between her and the boy worshipper of other days, thrilling her through and through with a strange new excitement, and with secret longings of which she was half ashamed for the unknown that seemed to lie in Valentine Bryant’s hands and to hold out to her all sorts of vague and wonderful possibilities.

CHAPTER VIII.

LIFE had carried Enid Fairfax along with gigantic strides, when, at the early hour of half-past nine the following day, she found herself hurrying Eastward in a hansom cab in obedience to a brief summons which had reached her by special messenger at eight o'clock in the morning. She had arrayed herself in the new dress of pale lilac which she had purchased the day before, a little structure of lace and Parma violets crowned her soft fair hair, and the pretty delicate-colored ribbons framed in her lovely face with a setting as of spring flowers. She had never looked more fair, and perhaps she knew it, and was glad, for she said to herself as she went, "He has sent for me to make me his wife! It is my wedding-day, and I am glad, glad and proud, for I love him,—I love him!"

She was a little flushed and breathless: how slowly the hansom seemed to go, threading its way through the throng of omnibuses and carts along the crowded thoroughfare! Would she be late? What would he say to her? she

wondered. How would he address her on their marriage morning,—he whose wooing had been so brief and stormy?

She lost herself in the wildest imaginings, that were as widely remote from the reality as it was possible to conceive; for she knew no more of the nature and temper of the man who had summoned her than of the merest stranger that passed her by in the street.

The morning was faintly misty, and a trifle chilly, as May mornings in London are apt to be. There was no glad sunshine to warm that little lonely bride on her solitary way, but she did not miss it, neither did the sadness of it all strike her; she was not at all sorry for herself because she was alone on that day of days of a woman's life, when she is usually surrounded by those who have loved and known her since her childhood; she was going all by herself into the unknown, and yet she was not in the least afraid.

She did not know the man; he was nearly old enough to be her father; his thoughts, his tastes, his opinions, were all a closed volume to her; and yet an unbounded faith in him and in

his goodness filled her heart with hope and happiness.

As the hansom pulled up at the door in Lincoln's Inn Fields she saw that he was standing there waiting for her. Her heart sank a little as he took his place by her side with scarcely a word of greeting.

He was pale and silent: for some moments he did not even speak to her; then, with an apparent effort, he turned towards her:

"You understand, Enid, do you not, what we are both going to do this morning? I am taking you to a church close by, where I have arranged that we are to be married."

The lovely flush of hope and happiness had already faded away from her face; she only bent her head so that he should not see the gathering tears in her eyes.


"This step, which you see has been forced upon us by—circumstances," he continued, in a cold, measured voice, and with a perceptible pause before the last word which made her realize all at once how entirely those "circumstances" were her own fault, "this step is one which I believe we are both taking deliberately, and of our own free will. You understand this, do you not?"

"Oh, yes," she murmured, brokenly. "How can I ever thank you? You are very good to me."

"I believe that I am doing my duty," he answered, gravely, and after that he said nothing more.

What a grotesque and hideous nightmare was the scene that followed!—the bare, empty church, with its whitewashed walls and gloomy galleries, the hollow sound of their footsteps echoing drearily up the aisle, to where a dull-looking clergyman of the old-fashioned Low-Church type stood awaiting them, glaring at them suspiciously over the top of his spectacles, whilst the bustling and obsequious pew-opener and her rheumatic husband, pressed into the service for the occasion, exchanged glances of amusement as they took their places behind them.

But whatever might be his suspicions and surmises, the rector had no possible excuse for expressing them. The license, purchased only yesterday, was in due order, the dull brick edifice in Bloomsbury was Mr. Bryant's parish church, although he had never been inside of it before, and the bride was of age. If it was



a runaway match, there seemed to be no sufficient reason for it: the bridegroom was of sedate appearance, while the bride looked sad enough for a funeral. The Rev. Mr. Boyne was puzzled: so queer a couple had never come to him to be married before; but there was nothing that he could say against it; moreover, he was a poor man with a large family, and the fees were of some importance to him.

It did not take long, that wedding ceremony; there was no glad hymn of joy, no chanting of the psalms, no organ to peal forth the immortal triumph-notes of the Wedding March. It was all dull, and cold, and monotonous; and it was all very quickly over.

In less than half an hour's time Valentine and his bride were back again in the hansom that had waited for them outside the door of the church.

He looked so cold and stern, and so utterly wretched into the bargain, that out of her despair a little courage arose in her heart. She laid her hand timidly upon his arm.

"Do not look so unhappy," she managed to say to him. "Is this so terrible to you? Why did you not tell me before? But, indeed, in-

deed, I will try and prove my gratitude to you."

It was as though he did not hear the faint pleading voice: he passed his hand over his brow, and something like a groan burst from his lips.

"Oh, don't! don't!" she cried, brokenly. "Am I then so utterly repulsive to you?" Then, with a little trembling laugh, she added, impulsively, "Anyhow, I am not a beggar: there may at least be some worldly advantage to you in this marriage."

He turned round upon her almost savagely. "Are you thinking about your money?" he cried, with a harsh and scornful laugh. "Do you suppose I want your money? that it is for *that* I have made you my wife? Good God! if I were starving I would not touch one farthing of it."

It seemed to him to be the very last drop in his cup of bitterness, that she should offer her money to him as a consolation.

The hansom drew up at his door in Lincoln's Inn Fields. He got out and held out his hand to her.

"Am I to come in?" she asked, in surprise.

"Certainly. You have a right here now. Besides, I wish to speak to you."

She followed him meekly up the stone staircase.

"Peters," said Bryant to that bewildered individual, who met them upon the threshold, "I wish to explain to you that this lady, who you will remember was here the other night, is my wife."

"Your wife, Mr. Bryant!" ejaculated Peters, faintly, almost sinking to the ground with the shock of this astounding announcement. "Good Lord, sir! my old woman said she understood you to say the lady was your niece!"

"Your old woman understood me wrongly, then. It did not suit me to announce my marriage to you then: it suits me to do so now. Mrs. Bryant wants some lunch. Go out at once, my good fellow, and get us something to eat."

He led the way into his private room, Enid following him timidly with a sinking heart.

"You said something about your money to me just now," he began when he had invited her to take a seat, and the door was shut. "I want you to know at once that your fortune will be entirely at your own disposal. There

are some papers here which I want you to sign presently; two of my clerks will witness them; they are to the effect that I have no part or share whatever in anything that you possess: I resign all possible claim that I might have as your husband."

"But I do not wish this!" she interrupted him, with real distress. "What do you take me for, that I should desire such a thing? I want you to share everything."

"You are very good. Unfortunately, such an arrangement is impossible. Moreover, I really do not want any addition to my income,—I am quite well enough off,—and I wish you to have the sole and entire control of your money. We will not discuss this subject any further, if you please," he added, with extreme coldness. "It must be sufficient for you to know that I have settled it."

She shaded her face with her hand, and the slow tears that had been gathering thickly in her eyes dropped down one by one upon the table against which she leaned.

Would he not give her one kind word?—one smile, one look, even, to warm the icy coldness that was falling upon her heart? Why had he

done this thing? why had he lifted her from earth to heaven, if it was only to cast her down into this outer darkness of blighting displeasure?

Ah, why did no good angel bid her throw herself at his feet and cry out to him, "For pity's sake, take me to your heart! Love me a little!—let me find my happiness in your enfolding arms!"

Such words, indeed, were beating their way tumultuously to her lips, but she had not the courage to utter them. Perhaps if she had done so, if she had pleaded boldly for the love she craved, things might have ended differently. He was not perhaps so cold towards her as he seemed to be. Assuredly it was an effort to him to keep up this attitude of anger and of scorn. He was hardening his heart against her, crushing down all softer thoughts with an iron hand; his angry disgust at this marriage, which he had neither sought nor desired, but into which her folly had driven him, made him shut his ears to her trembling words, and rendered him blind to all her sweetness and beauty. Yet all the time, through all the harshness and the cruelty, there were voices within him clamoring to be heard, to which he obstinately refused

to listen. If he had given way but for one moment, or if she had but cried out to him those magic words, "I love you!" then surely the barriers of his angry pride must have broken down, and all his hardness have melted into tenderness. But she was not brave enough to speak, and it did not occur to him for a moment to divine that this lovely girl in the prime of her youth and her beauty had actually fallen in love with him. Had she not called him "old"? Had she not come to him in the first instance purely and solely for professional advice? And, above all, had she not actually expressed a wish that he had been her uncle? Bryant did not believe in miracles, and that Enid should suddenly and unexpectedly have discovered herself to be in love with him would certainly have struck him as little short of miraculous. And so the golden opportunity, that might have changed the whole aspect of life to them both, lingered but for a moment and then spread its wings and passed away, as opportunities have a habit of doing if we do not seize them quickly ere they fly.

"I want you to tell me now," were his next words to her, cold still, but not quite so cruel and cutting, "where you would like to live."

She looked at him in surprise.

"Wherever you wish, of course," she answered, quickly.

"No, it must be your own choice. You will not, I dare say, care to remain long at those lodgings?"

"Oh, no! they are dreadful! Indeed, London altogether—that is, of course, unless you like it best—is rather oppressive to me."

"You prefer the country, then?" he inquired, politely, passing over her timid deference to his tastes.

"Oh, very much." And a little color and animation came flashing back into her face and eyes.

"I ask you," he continued, "because I happen to know of a small furnished house in Hertfordshire, belonging to one of my clients, that is to be let. It is vacant now, and can be had immediately; it is a pretty little place, with a charming garden, close to the church and village, and about two miles from a station. There are good stables, and a gardener is left, two in-door servants as well, I believe, and the country round is wooded and interesting. I fancy it would suit you. Do you like the idea of it?"

"Immensely!" she exclaimed, with eager interest. "How kind of you to think of it! But——" and she looked at him with a little questioning hesitation, "if it is two miles from the station, how would it suit you for getting up to town? You would have to come up and down every day, would you not?"

He looked away from her: he could not meet her eyes. For a moment, indeed, a sense of actual shame overpowered him at that which he intended to do.

It was a base trick to play upon her, said the voice of his better self within him; but he would not listen to that voice: why should he? He had surely done enough for her, all that honor required of him. He had saved her name: what more could she possibly expect of him?

"You do not seem quite to understand the position of affairs between us," he said, in a cold metallic voice that seemed to freeze her into stone. "The fact is, I have no thought whatever of living with you. There is no reason why we should remain a drag upon each other. You bear my name, and I feel certain that you will do nothing to disgrace it. For my part, I

will make it my business to attend scrupulously to your welfare and your comfort, but we need make no further claims upon each other. You will go your way, and I shall go mine. I have no intention of altering my manner of life, and I see no reason why you should not arrange your existence pleasantly without any reference to me whatever. Have I spoken plainly enough? do you understand me now?"

She rose slowly to her feet. She was white down to her very lips. For a moment she looked at him fixedly, and there was something in the clear light of those blue eyes that almost—not quite—pierced through that outer coating of selfish cruelty and hard-heartedness in which he had enveloped himself. His own eyes fell to the ground beneath that steadfast look of mingled reproach and scorn. He could not brazen it out, or meet it.

"I understand you perfectly; and I will obey you," she said, at last, slowly and very distinctly. Then, without a word of farewell, she went quietly away by herself, out of the warm shelter of that charming room, which was never more to open its doors to her again.

CHAPTER IX.

"WHAT has befallen your *fidus Achates*, Marion? I never saw any one so changed in my life."

The ladies were sitting at luncheon together in 25 Halkin Street, one day at the end of the first week in June.

Marion, fresh from her foreign travels, was looking radiantly well, and last night the Challengers had celebrated their return to their London home by a little festive dinner-party to their most intimate friends.

"Do you really think him changed?" said Mrs. Challenger, thoughtfully, in answer to Florence Stourton's remark, as she nibbled a slender radish with her strong little teeth. "Do you know, I myself certainly did think that he seemed a little bit depressed."

"Depressed! A perfect death's-head at a feast! Banquo's ghost was a rollicking jester compared to him. Why, he hardly spoke a word all dinner-time. And yet Mr. Bryant is usually one of the best of talkers."

"It is odd, certainly," mused Mrs. Challenger, who had been secretly marvelling over this very subject the whole morning. "I have seen him several times since we came home, and each time I have fancied the same thing. Last night he was as lugubrious as a mute at a funeral the whole evening. I have been wondering what can be the matter with him. He told Tom he had never been so busy in his life, so it can't be money; and I noticed last night that he ate a very good dinner, and that he asked for the quails *à la Provençale* a second time, so it can't be his liver."

"It is a woman!" cried Mrs. Stourton, with decision: "I know the symptoms! Depend upon it, it is a woman, my dear!" And doubtless the fair widow, who was not at all unaware of her dearest friend's little weaknesses, made the suggestion with all that zest and relish which so often actuate the little stabs given us by those who know us best.

"What nonsense!" answered Marion, frowning quite crossly. "It shows how very little you know about Valentine Bryant! Really, some people are never quite happy unless they are scenting a scandal."

"Oh, a *scandal*, Marion! that is a strong word. Poor dear Mr. Bryant, I don't of course pretend to know him as well as you do, dearest, but Heaven forbid that I should accuse him of anything scandalous! No, I only think it very likely—to put it in plain language—that he may be in love."

"In love!" repeated Marion, scornfully, but very irritably. "How little, as you admit, you know him! Does a man look black or savage when he is in love, pray?"

"Yes, certainly, if his love has been unsuccessful. Mr. Bryant, to my fancy, has all the aspect of a rejected lover."

Marion Challenger did not like these remarks at all. She was really barely civil to her dear friend during the remainder of her visit, and for the first time for many years she was positively glad to see the back of the hansom that carried Mrs. Stourton away to keep an early appointment at her dress-maker's.

"Florence Stourton grows positively spiteful as she gets older," said Mrs. Challenger to herself as she tied the strings of her gold-and-green bonnet underneath her plump little chin before the glass a few minutes later. "The fact is, she

envies me the friendship of such a man as Valentine. A woman, indeed! As if a woman could come into his life and I know nothing about it! However——” She nodded her head with determination, and the sentence remained unfinished save in the recesses of her innermost thoughts.

Not long afterwards Mrs. Challenger, leaning back in her well-turned-out victoria, was being carried swiftly in a northeasterly direction. On the seat beside her reposed a small square deal box with a large foreign-looking label upon its upper surface. The safety of this case seemed to cause her some anxiety, for she steadied it carefully with her hands, preserving it thus from all jolts and jars, during the whole of her long drive to Lincoln’s Inn Fields.

“Mr. Bryant at home, Peters?”

“No, ma’am, Mr. Bryant is at the Courts. I hope I see you well, ma’am, after your furrin tour? and Mr. Challenger is, I hope, well also?” added Peters, smilingly, for Mrs. Challenger was an old friend.

“I am quite well, thanks, and so is Mr. Challenger. I am sorry Mr. Bryant is out; but I suppose I may go into his room all the same?”

"Oh, dear, yes, ma'am." And Peters threw the intervening doors wide open with ready welcome. "Let me relieve you of that box, ma'am."

"No; I daren't let it out of my hands. It is some Venetian glass, Peters, which I have brought all the way from Venice as a present to Mr. Bryant. To tell you the truth, I am almost glad that he is out, for I want to unpack it and arrange it myself in his room. I know exactly where it is to go, in that right-hand corner cabinet, and I want to put it in the place I mean it to fill." She set the case carefully down upon the table, and began to unfasten the string. Peters offered his assistance.

"If you will just help me to lift off the top, and get me a soft duster, I can manage perfectly well," said the energetic little lady, as she took off her delicate pearl-gray gloves and adjusted herself to her task.

But Peters, of course, hung attentively by, as perhaps she intended him to do. The glass, which was of the most fragile description, had been swathed in multifarious wrappings of cotton-wool and tissue-paper, and finally embedded in nests of hay. Peters helped her to extricate

the specimens from their envelopings, and cleared away what he called "the mess;" and as each object emerged, ruby, amber, or opal in color, and graceful or quaint in form and finish, he gave utterance to expressions of wonder and admiration. The unpacking and the dusting, and finally the setting up of all these lovely cups, and goblets, and vases, in the places which seemed most eminently suited to them, was necessarily a work of some time, and the best part of an hour slipped happily away before Marion had completed her labors, and it was only when she was once more drawing on her *peau de Suède* gloves that she ventured upon a few tentative observations:

"Mr. Bryant is not looking at all well, Peters."

"No, ma'am." There was absolutely no emphasis in the words: Peters neither queried nor assented.

"It seems to me that he looks not so much ill as worried," continued the lady.

"Yes, ma'am," replied Peters, with the same irritating impassibility.

"Do you think there is anything amiss with him?" persisted Mrs. Challenger, this time in a distinctly questioning tone.

The old man shook his head and looked down.

"Impossible to say, ma'am," was the only answer she was able to extract.

Then Mrs. Challenger took a different line. She began by softening his heart in a material but perfectly simple manner, and then she spoke anew :

"I do not ask from idle curiosity, as you know, Peters. I am a very old friend of Mr. Bryant's, and I can't bear to see him sitting silent and looking wretched. People who were at my house last night remarked upon the alteration in him. If he is not well, he ought to see a doctor, and Mr. Challenger would do his best to persuade him to go to one. It is my belief he is overworked."

"No, ma'am, it's not that." And Peters, who was by no means insensible to her attentions, became suddenly mysteriously communicative. "It's not his work, ma'am; it's this marriage that is preying upon his mind."

"Marriage? whose marriage?" she repeated, blankly.

"Why, Mr. Bryant's, of course, ma'am," cried Peters, waxing more and more confidential.

"Ah, it's a strange business, and I never have made out the rights of it!" continued the old man, shaking his head, "but my poor master has been an altered man ever since that day."

Even then Mrs. Challenger could not understand. She sank feebly down into a chair, a little pale and breathless. "I don't follow you, Peters. I can't think what you are talking about. What is the marriage you are speaking of? Is it old Mr. Bryant who has married again? why, he must be seventy at least!"

"I wish it were his father, Mrs. Challenger, that I do! That would be a trifle indeed as compared to this! but it's himself as 'as gone and got married all of a sudden, with no preparation, no nothing to make it right or natural."

"Your master is *married!*" she gasped. "Oh, but you must be joking, Peters! He would have told me! It is impossible! it can't be true!" And poor Marion wrung her hands helplessly in great distress.

"It's gospel truth, Mrs. Challenger," solemnly asseverated the old man, who, now that his lips were opened, seemed to find it a relief to unburden his mind to her; "I only wish it wasn't true."

"But when—when did this terrible thing happen?"

"The day that he was actually married, ma'am, that I could not tell you; I only know that one night the lady came here to see him quite late; of course I did not know who she was, and he seemed much annoyed at her being here: however, I left them together, and they had luncheon together the next day quite friendly like, and then there came an elderly gentleman, very angry and abusive, who insisted on coming in, and there was a quarrel between them, ma'am, which makes me think it was a sort of runaway affair, and that he was her father come to look after her. He went away at last, and then the lady went too. But about three days afterwards Mr. Bryant brought the same lady here, and as he came in at the door he turns round to me, and says, 'Peters, this lady is my wife.' You could have knocked me down with a feather, ma'am; you could indeed!"

Mrs. Challenger looked as if it would have taken very much less than a feather to knock her down.

"Get me a glass of sherry, please," she said, faintly, and for a moment the room went round

and round with her. After which she began to wish with feminine intensity, and from the bottom of her heart, that she had not unpacked all those lovely glass goblets and set them up in the Chippendale cupboards of this monster of ingratitude and duplicity.

"Where is she?" she gasped, when she had gulped down the sherry.

"I don't know, ma'am. She has never been here since."

"Then—then I suppose Mr. Bryant does not live here now?"

"Yes, ma'am, just the same exactly."

"But—but surely—he lives with his wife, doesn't he?"

"No, ma'am ; he lives here just the same."

"But this is extraordinary ! Is he not going to leave these chambers?"

"Not that I know of. He has not said anything about leaving them."

Marion Challenger drove away from Lincoln's Inn Fields with a perfect tempest of conflicting emotions tearing at her heart. For some time blind anger dominated all the rest.

"I will never believe in man again !" she said to herself, furiously, as she settled herself back

against the cushions of her victoria. "Is it possible to conceive such perfidy, such duplicity, such double-faced treachery, coupled with such ingratitude!" Then, when she had exhausted every abusive epithet in her vocabulary, she began to cry a little under the shelter of her veil.

"And I, whom he used to call his best friend! who would have made allowances for him, who would have forgiven him any folly, if only he had come to me openly and honestly and told me all about it! Oh, it will teach me not to put any faith in anybody again! What a dreadful, wicked, false world it is, to be sure! to think of his playing me such a trick behind my back, the moment I had gone away! And, yet, how do I know that he did it then? Peters doesn't seem to know how long ago he married this wretched woman. He may have been married to her for years, for all we can tell; and all the time he was continually talking against marriage, and telling me what a mistake it was, and that he should never marry anybody! Why, the Father of lies isn't in it with Valentine Bryant! And I, who believed in him, and thought him the most straightforward and honest fellow in the world!"

Poor Marion! it was a horrible shock to her, all the more so because she knew she had gone out of her way to ferret out a secret which Valentine had evidently not intended her to know. What business of hers was it to go to his rooms and cross-question his servant, bestowing a sovereign upon him, if the whole truth must be told, in order to loosen his tongue? It was true that she had had no idea of the terrible nature of the revelation that was to be made to her: it was in all kindness of heart that she had pursued her investigations, believing that it was some bodily ailment that preyed upon his spirits. But persons who go out of their way to invoke the powers of darkness can never reckon with certainty upon the nature of the ghosts who may be raised by their unholy summons, and no wandering ghost out of shadow-land could have startled poor Marion half so much as this truly fearful discovery that had burst upon her concerning her greatest friend.

And there was nothing to be done—nothing! she dared not tell him what she had found out, nor the means she had made use of to unearth his secret,—for secret it was, of course.

No man marries a wife in that hole-and-

corner sort of way, if he means to introduce her openly to his friends and take her to their houses. Besides, apparently they did not live together: he was presumably ashamed of his marriage, and of his wife! Or perhaps he had been married all along, ever since they had first known him, and he, poor fellow, had been obliged to keep the matter concealed.

And then, with a natural feminine instinct, her mind veered round into numerous possible excuses and palliations of his crime, whilst her righteous wrath arose anew, this time against the designing woman who had entrapped him to his ruin.

"Some low, under-bred, mercenary creature, no doubt," she said to herself viciously and savagely, "who got over him in some detestable way; who is not a lady, and whom he cannot possibly associate with! Oh, poor, poor Valentine! if I knew everything, I dare say I should find that he is very, very much to be pitied."

CHAPTER X.

THERE was a light wind in the summer air. The petals of the June roses—red and pink and cream—lay strewn across the velvet smoothness of the lawn; the fluttering leaves of the silver birch rustled with a soft murmur like that of running water, and high up in the elms overhead the rooks cawed a lazy monotone as they swung to and fro on the swaying branches. The garden was full of the sweet warm scent of carnations and mignonette and sweet-peas; and in the midst of it stood a long low red-gabled house, its bow-windows all open to the air, whilst a tangled mass of creepers, jasmine, clematis, and honeysuckle, half concealed the walls beneath a rich profusion of leaf and blossom.

It was a typical English picture: the home-like house embosomed in greenery, the flower-studded garden, the lawn sloping gently down to the sunk fence, and then the flat meadows and the green hedge-rows beyond, that stretched away towards the low blue hills in the distance, with just a glimpse midway of the thatched

cottages of the village, and of the gray church tower half buried in ivy, about whose feet they clustered.

Through the fluttering muslin curtains of the drawing-room windows the young mistress of this charming house and garden came out into the sunshine, which shone straight into her blue eyes, while the light wind instantly possessed himself boldly of the soft stray tendrils of her hair and twisted them merrily about for his own purposes.

How pretty it all was, and how tired of it all she was! for what is the use of having a nice house, and a delightful garden, and lots of money to live in it, if there is never anybody to share the pleasure of it with you? Enid sighed a little as she stood there in the sunshine. She looked very sad and weary; all the brightness was gone out of her eyes, and the corners of her mouth drooped sorrowfully downward.

"Any orders for the coachman, please, ma'am?" inquired the neat parlor-maid, coming out of the house behind her.

"Orders, Jane? Oh, I don't know; I don't think I will ride to-day.—I am tired of riding," she added in a lower voice to herself.

"Will you have the pony-cart, then, ma'am?" asked the maid.

"Yes—no—I don't think so. Tell Barkham I am coming round to the stables: I will see him there."

She went listlessly down to the end of the garden and back, then strolled through the shrubbery towards the small but perfectly compact and well-arranged stables.

Her little bay mare, expectant of sugar, whinied at her approach. The dun pony reached out his nose to be patted and made much of. The respectable Barkham hurried up to attend to his mistress.

How delighted she had been with it all at first! How much she had enjoyed her rides and drives at the beginning! and how little she cared about them now!

She was always alone. No one came to call upon her; no neighbors invited her to their houses. People fought shy of the beautiful solitary woman who wore a wedding-ring and called herself "Mrs. Bryant," who had stated that she was not a widow, and yet whose husband had never been seen by anybody.

"Who is Mr. Bryant?" they asked of one

another,—a question which soon resolved itself into another :

“Is there a Mr. Bryant at all?”

They shook their heads a good deal over it, and came to the conclusion in the end that there was something not at all satisfactory about the new-comer.

“She is much too young to live by herself,” said the wives.

“And much too good-looking,” added the husbands.

So it was voted, without a dissenting voice, that it would not “do” to call on Mrs. Bryant. The vagueness of her position seemed to savor of evil, and the good folks of the neighborhood determined to take no notice of her.

The vicar, indeed, from motives of professional duty, did think himself bound to pay one visit to the Grange, but the report he brought back of his new parishioner was not a favorable one.

He found her to be a lady undoubtedly, but a lady surrounded by mystery. No husband was to be seen, and Mrs. Bryant had evaded all the questions he had endeavored to put to her upon that delicate subject. On the whole, the vicar

thought that his wife had perhaps better not call upon her.

So she lived alone, and ate her heart out with hopeless longings for love, for companionship, and for happiness, all of which seemed to be so cruelly denied to her. Often and often she lay awake weeping at nights, her heart riven in twain by bitter humiliation and by a great despair. Why, oh, why, she cried out in her bitterness, had he married her, if it was only to cast her forth into the outer darkness of his eternal indifference? She received frequent letters from Bryant,—letters that were all about business, about investments of her money, or about transfers of some portions of her stocks. In these letters, which began simply "Dear Enid" and were signed invariably "Yours, V. B.," there were, indeed, polite inquiries after her health, and prettily-worded solicitations that she would address herself to him if there was anything she required to add to her comfort or her pleasure which he could procure for her in London. But never, never was there in them the faintest word or sign of any warmer or tenderer interest. The poor child used to sit reading these letters over and over again by the

hour, striving in vain to twist some evidence of kindness or affection out of the cold and formal sentences. At last a dull dreary hopelessness settled down upon her heart, taking all the life and energy out of her, and leaving her worn and tired and weary, like one who is at the end of life rather than at its beginning.

She was forced to come to the miserable conclusion that Bryant did not and never would love her; and there were no distractions in her existence to make her forget this primary grief of her heart. She grew tired of riding, tired of driving, tired of her garden and of her books, tired of her life altogether.

To-day, when she left the stables, out of sheer aimless idleness she wandered into the fields outside her little domain. There was a public pathway across the meadows towards the village. She went along it slowly, with down-bent head and lagging footsteps. The meadows on either side of her were starred with ox-eye daisies and flushed with scarlet poppies. Enid gathered a little bunch of them as she went by, putting them into the waist-band of her dress.

What a desolate, forlorn, lonely creature she was! It came into her mind to remember

Bryant's oft-repeated suggestion that she should advertise for a companion to live with her. She disliked the idea, and he had not insisted upon it. She had never had women friends, she knew nothing of women and their ways; and the idea of being always obliged to talk to a stranger oppressed and alarmed her. Yet to-day it occurred to her that perhaps even an uncongenial stranger might be better than this horrible, perpetual solitude.

At this juncture of her meditations she looked up suddenly. A man's upright figure was coming towards her along the meadow path. There was something, to her fancy, familiar in the slender form that swung lightly over the stile. He came towards her gayly twirling his walking-stick and cutting off the crimson heads of the poppies in ruthless destruction on his way. Then all at once she saw who it was. With a cry of surprise and delight she ran forward with outstretched hands to meet him.

"You? you? you?" she gasped, absolutely breathless with delight and astonishment. "Oh, can it be true? or am I dreaming? Oh, it is too good to be true!" She seemed to be almost

suffocated with joy. Was it a wonder that such a reception turned the young man's head?

"My dear girl!" he cried, and the color rose in his fair face as he grasped her eager hands, "this is indeed a delightful miracle! I never thought I should see you in this world again! Where in the name of fortune have you dropped from? Where are you staying? What are you doing, pray, in this God-forsaken corner of the world?"

"Come back with me to my house at once, and I will tell you everything."

"Your house?"

"Yes, the Grange, here behind us," pointing to the low red gables across the fields.

"Oh! you have taken the Grange? But," and he looked with a curious bewilderment down at his companion, "what have you done with the wicked guardian, and the moribund lover? Ah!" suddenly catching sight of the gold ring upon her ungloved hand, "you have married him after all, then?"

"No, no. Poor James! he is dead. I saw his death in the paper a week ago. I left them long ago,—six weeks, I think," with a little sigh. "All that is over: it seems like a dream now."

"But that ring upon your finger?—what does it mean?" he persisted, his eyes fixed uneasily upon the tell-tale circlet of gold.

"Come in, and I will tell you all about it, Mr. Conway."

In the shadowy sweetness of her flower-scented little drawing-room they sat down together, and she told him the story of her marriage. With a curious mingling of pride and shame, the young wife, who was a wife in name only, tried to give the best coloring she could of it to this other friend of her earlier days, withholding from him some things and smoothing down others. She had run away from home, she told him, in order to escape being forced into that hateful marriage with poor James Kirby; then this friend, who was very kind, and very sorry for her trouble, came forward to help her, and they had agreed to be married and then to part. Of course it was much the best arrangement for both; he did not want a wife really, and she was free to live in the country, which she much preferred; he had taken this house for her: was it not nice? There was an apologetic tone running through this somewhat garbled version of her little history, a faint accent

of defiance too, which did not escape Arthur Conway's acute perceptions. Her story puzzled him; he listened to her in silence, neither sympathizing nor denouncing.

"And this phantom husband," he asked, when she had finished, "does he not come down here to visit you?"

"No, he has never been here." And, despite her bravest efforts, a note of dejection and sadness betrayed itself in the answer.

"And who, may I ask, is the unconscionable idiot who, for no given reason, marries a beautiful girl only to leave her alone to the tender mercies of any chapter of accidents that may happen to her?"

She reddened deeply under the boldness of the words:

"You—you must not call him names, or we shall quarrel. He is a very clever man. I have—a great respect for him."

She brought out the words with some difficulty and hesitation.

"But his name?—the name which I suppose is yours, since you are Miss Fairfax no longer?" persisted Conway.

"His name is Bryant,—Valentine Bryant."

"Good God!" ejaculated Arthur, springing excitedly to his feet. "You have married *that* old fossil? I beg your pardon," catching the look of sudden offence and anger in her face, "but I know the man quite well,—in fact, he is my first-cousin. You don't mean to tell me you are *his* wife?"

"Your first-cousin!" she repeated, in amazement. "How extraordinary! But you must not say unkind things of him," she continued, with a heightened color, forgetting how she herself had once called him old. "He is only forty, you know, and he is a very handsome man. I don't think I ever saw a finer-looking man."

It cost her something to say this; it was as if she were tearing open the secrets of her soul; yet her loyalty to him whose name she bore forced her to speak the words.

Arthur Conway was stalking about the room. Hot indignation boiled within him, for, despite his extravagances and his follies, he was a generous-hearted young fellow, and the spectacle of this fair girl, towards whom he himself had once experienced a romantic attraction, left thus desolate and uncared for by "that prig," as he called Bryant to himself, filled him with longings to

inflict condign and corporeal punishment upon his respectable and middle-aged cousin. "I should like to kick the brute," he thought, angrily, but he was too much afraid of offending Enid to say the words aloud.

"And after all," he said, stopping short in his perambulations in front of her and looking down upon the listless drooping figure that lay flung back against the sofa cushions,—“after all, you need not have tied yourself up to him at all. Since James Kirby is dead, the danger was not so very great: you might have waited, and tided the storm.” And, like every other man from the creation of the world downward, Arthur Conway, because he found that she was beyond his reach, became instantly convinced that Enid was the one and only woman on earth whom he wished for, and that her marriage to Bryant was a personal grievance to himself.

Then suddenly Enid sprang to her feet, and confronted him with crimson cheeks and flashing eyes. "You don't suppose that I regret it, do you?" she cried; "that I wish it undone! Why, I would sooner be his wife than anything else in the world! I am proud of it—proud!" Her voice broke into something very like a sob,

as she turned quickly away to hide from him the tears which gathered in her eyes. The next moment they had vanished, and with a little laugh that was almost hysterical she turned back to him with a face of bright animation :

“But tell me of yourself. How do you come here, Mr. Conway?”

He was perhaps a little bit afraid of her ; anyhow, he fell into her lighter mood with ready tact :

“If you are Enid Bryant, you are also my cousin, please remember. Cousins call each other by their Christian names : mine is Arthur.”

“Very well, Arthur,” she acquiesced, with a fugitive blush which made her more lovely than ever in his eyes. “Give an account of yourself. What brings you to this part of the world?”

“My mother, who lives five miles off. By the way, hasn’t she called upon you?”

Enid shook her head : “Nobody has called upon me. I don’t quite know why.”

Arthur Conway thought he knew why, and he ground his teeth savagely : “Your husband should at least have told my mother to call.”

“Never mind. What does it signify?” she

said, carelessly. "I don't want visitors, and I shall not be lonely any longer now," she added, with a brilliant smile which lit up her whole face, "for you will come and see me, Cousin Arthur, won't you?"

"Will I not?"

"If you would ride with me sometimes, it would be so nice; it would make such a difference," she continued, wholly unconscious of the flattery she was distilling for him.

"Of course we will ride together, whenever you like," he assented gladly. "Come now and show me your horses."

They went out together to the stables, and into the garden. They inspected the horses and the dogs, they fed the doves in the aviary, they talked to the parrot on his perch on the lawn, like a couple of children. They laughed and chattered and were happy together; and by tacit consent the name of Valentine was mentioned no more between them. It was but natural that he should stay and share her luncheon, and by and by she drove him in her little village cart as far as the gates of his mother's park.

"After all," he said, as he parted from her, with numerous plans and promises for the fu-

ture,—“after all, I am glad you do not know any of the stupid people about here! They would only be a nuisance; we can do very well without them, can’t we, Enid? and I swear you shall not be left in your solitude any longer.”

But he said no word to his mother concerning Valentine Bryant’s mysterious wife. As a matter of fact, Mrs. Conway, although she had heard of the new tenant of the Grange from the gossip of the neighborhood, had never for an instant connected her name with that of her stern and unapproachable nephew. Valentine’s confirmed bachelorhood wrapped him, in her eyes, in an inviolable security. Mrs. Conway would as soon have suspected him of a theft as of a secret marriage: both seemed equally remote from the possibilities of his character.

The name of Bryant is not a very uncommon one, and if this mysterious young woman was what most of the ladies in that part of the world declared her to be, perhaps even the name was an assumed one. She was not a person to be called upon. Mrs. Conway had not troubled herself to make any further speculations as to what she was.

The mother was glad, with a blissful uncon-

sciousness of causes, when her son said to her that evening, "After all, mother, I don't think I shall go to town this season. If you don't mind having me here, I think I will stop on quietly with you for a bit." And the good lady, as she gave a joyful assent to the proposition, said to herself, with satisfaction,—

"He can't get into any mischief down here, at any rate."

CHAPTER XI.

IN these days, it is not too much to say, Valentine Bryant was a miserable man. It is true that he went about his daily routine, his work, his duties, his pleasures, very much as usual; that he told himself over and over that everything was unchanged and that he was enjoying himself in his delightful free life as much as he had ever done; and yet, underlying it all, deep down in his heart of hearts he knew that it was not so, and that he was restless and irritable and ill at ease, and that the taste had gone out of everything for him.

He had lost that which, to every reasonable and responsible being, is of more value than wealth, or prosperity, or success: he had lost his self-respect.

In vain did he assure himself a hundred times a day that he had not done anything wherewith to reproach himself, that, on the contrary, he had, if anything, somewhat overstepped the boundaries of practical common sense in order to do a fine and quixotic deed, and that if he

regretted anything it should be the generous impulse of the moment, and not the prudence of a course of after-conduct which he had adopted deliberately and out of the convictions of his matured and well-thought-out judgment; yet, in spite of all these specious arguments and self-assurances, there was always that inner mentor whom he could not succeed in stifling, and who told him that he was selfish, and cruel, and altogether guilty.

Sometimes he caught himself wondering and wishing: wondering what the child thought of him, wishing that he could be with her for one short hour, just to see—just to know. Once or twice, even, a queer half-formed resolution flashed into his mind of running down some Sunday unexpectedly, to see for himself what was the manner of life led by this girl he had bound to himself, only to thrust away with so much determination. But always he was held back by other influences from carrying out this last idea,—influences partly of pride, but chiefly of self-indulgence.

“If I went, she might get over me,” he would think, doubtfully. “I might be tempted to stop; some emotion of pity or remorse might

induce me to undo all that I have been at such pains to make clear to her; and that would mean giving up my liberty, my tastes, my independence,—all, in fact, that makes life worth having.” And he would look round at his household gods, at his books, his curios, and his collections, at the four walls where he was so much at home with his pipe and his freedom, and say to himself that he could not and would not resign this niche in the world which he had created for himself, for a girl whom he knew little about, and for a life that would mean a deference to feminine whims and tempers, and the loss of the society of his friends, to say nothing of the too probable and altogether dreadful addition of family cares into the bargain.

Yet for all this he grew insensibly to watch for Enid's letters with a new sense of anxiety and eagerness. If they were overdue, he was fretfully annoyed. When they came, he pounced upon them with avidity. Like his own to her, Enid's letters were cold and formal, although always dutiful and grateful in tone; there was nothing of her inner nature or of her thoughts to be gathered from them, and yet the very sight

of the graceful feminine handwriting and the fragrance of the faint perfume that seemed to emanate from the written page as he opened it caused him a subtle and almost sensuous pleasure to which he learned to look forward with a curious sense of expectation.

The weeks of the London season slipped by quickly; the hours of his life were full, the claims both of work and of society left him but little leisure for thought; and yet the thought of her was there, underlying with a strange persistency every other action of his existence.

Oddly enough, as it seemed to him, he had dropped a little away from his close friendship with the Challengers. Marion, to his fancy, seemed to be somewhat changed towards him, and with his own secret eating at his heart he had not ventured upon asking her for an explanation of a difference that was one to be felt rather than to be described.

He had certainly dined several times in Hal-kin Street, and the dinners had been as excellent and the company as agreeable as of old, but if asked by Tom to stay behind for the customary smoke, Marion would yawn ostentatiously and declare herself too sleepy to sit

up, and would wish him a polite good-night and retire.

And, to tell the truth, he found Tom Challenger rather dull company without the zest of Marion's vivacious presence. Her defalcation annoyed and troubled him. He made sundry efforts to break through the reserve which seemed to have fallen on her, but he noticed that she avoided *tête-à-tête* conversations with him, and that she discouraged anything like a return to those old disquisitions on life and character, on motives and emotions, which used to form the staple food of their long friendly talks together. If he endeavored to resume these subjects in which they had both delighted, she would instantly return to the commonplaces of life,—Had he seen Millais's new picture? Did he like the new play at the Haymarket? Did not the Hungarian Band at Lady So-and-So's crush play delightfully?—like the veriest society prattler of them all. And this to him, with whom she had been wont to discuss those other higher things that concern the intellect and the soul, rather than the puerilities of the London season!

It annoyed him, and it hurt his vanity; and

yet it did not occur to him that she had found out his secret, and that this was the real cause of her change of manner to him.

He went out of his way to invite her and her husband to a dinner at his rooms, but the invitation was declined on the plea of a previous engagement. Again he wrote, and begged her to fix her own day, and again she replied that they had no day free to fix. He even humbled his pride so far as to ask her to bring Mrs. Stourton to strawberries and tea, since she could not come to dinner; but that invitation also was declined.

June and half of July had slipped away, and Bryant was still in the same condition of mind, dissatisfied with himself, yet propping himself up in his dissatisfaction by all sorts of specious and one-sided sophistries, angry with his old friend, and, by a reaction of that anger, secretly longing and yearning for something which he did not understand or realize, when one afternoon it happened to him to get into a train at the Temple Station of the underground railway on his way to visit a client in West Kensington who was laid up by an attack of the gout and was unable to come to see him.

For a few stations Valentine read his newspaper and gave no thought to his fellow-passengers, then at Sloane Square there was some change in the occupants of the carriage, and he perceived, without paying very much attention to them, that two middle-aged ladies had got in, who were talking with some animation to each other. He did not, of course, listen to their conversation, but presently the name of Arthur Conway struck with surprise on his ear, and, without intending to do so, his attention was involuntarily caught by it.

"It is rather amusing, you know," one of the ladies was saying: "his mother imagines that he has turned over a new leaf and is going to be a good boy for the future, and all the time the county is positively ringing with the scandal. Nobody, of course, dare tell Mrs. Conway; she goes about saying to everybody that dear Arthur has quite sown all his wild oats, and is so happy at home in the quiet country life with her. And all day long, my dear, he simply lives at this woman's house, or else is driving or riding about the lanes with her in the most unblushing manner!"

"But who is the woman?"

"Oh, nobody knows exactly,—one of those beautiful incognitas, I suppose, who has got what is called a history. She seems to have no belongings; wears a wedding-ring and calls herself 'Mrs.' and has probably no right to either. The sort of woman who always gets hold of a foolish good-looking young fellow like Arthur and utterly ruins him, getting diamonds out of him, and preventing his making a respectable marriage. Creatures of that kind ought to be destroyed, stamped out and poisoned, like black beetles and rats!"

"What a dreadful pity! And Arthur Conway used to be such a nice boy!"

"Well, he won't be a 'nice boy' now any longer. One will have to keep him away from one's daughters at arm's length, after this disgraceful episode."

"I don't suppose he is very likely to trouble our girls, my dear," remarked the other: "he probably doesn't mind in the least being tabooed by decent women."

"No, I dare say not, just at present; these sort of women are more amusing to young men, I have no doubt, than our nice, innocent-minded, lady-like girls; but Arthur Conway will live to

be sorry for it some day. Just wait and see what he will do when Mrs. Bryant throws him over for a newer fancy,—as of course she will do.”

A blackness as of night fell suddenly upon Valentine Bryant. A horrible helplessness seemed to paralyze him: he sat on speechless and breathless behind the shelter of his newspaper.

The train was rushing into the noisy brightness of South Kensington Station. The ladies rose and left the carriage, and he found himself alone.

“My God!” he said, aloud, as the train began to move slowly on. “My God!” He said it twice, bending forward upon his knees, his face pale, his eyes fixed upon vacancy.

The full horror of what he had listened to grew and grew upon him. It was *his wife* of whom these women had spoken,—his wife! and Arthur Conway, his own cousin, was her lover!

Oh, shame unutterable! oh, disgrace beyond word or thought, that such a thing should be said!—that such a thing might not improbably *be*! Then at last that inner voice he had striven so often to smother arose once more, and this time unanswerably, within him.

“This is your doing,” it said to him: “it is

your fault if this girl, whom you made your own and then cast away as a worthless thing, has fallen and is lost! What right had you to leave her to fight the hard battle of life alone, you who had sworn before God to comfort and honor and cleave to her until death? Who are you, to have dared to set aside those oaths as though they were nothing?" And for once there were no answering arguments wherewith to refute these burning questions.

Arthur Conway, too! that he, of all others, should be the man! The boy whom he had lectured and scolded and rebuked all his life,—that he should be the one to do him this injury, and to drag down his name in the mire! It was the very irony of fate!

He clinched his fists and ground his teeth as he thought of him, and sullen curses rose hot and fierce in his heart against his young kinsman,—curses that broke from his white lips with a deep and bitter intensity.

Where the underground railway deposited Valentine Bryant on that eventful afternoon, history deponeth not. Certainly only it is that his client in West Kensington awaited his coming in vain, and that much later on in the

day, maimed and bruised in soul and faint and halting in gait, he found his way back to his own chambers and cast himself down wearily in his arm-chair by the open window.

The leaves on the plane-tree outside were fluttering in the evening breeze; the sparrows were chirruping in the little court-yard at the back of the house; only a distant foot-fall echoed now and again across the stone flags below. All at once Bryant called to mind that other day, in early May, when he and Enid had lunched together so happily in this very window. He seemed to see her now as she had sat over-against him, her fair head and lovely face set like a picture against the harmonious background of the room, her lips curled into a smile, her large blue eyes fixed timidly upon him. How sweet she had seemed to his eyes on that day! how good, and true, and simple, in her childish candor! and what strange and unaccustomed things had there not arisen in his heart regarding her! how near, how very near, he had been to loving her!

And that was the girl of whom those women had said shameful things, likening her to all that is worst and most degraded in womanhood.

"It is a lie! it is a lie!" he cried, aloud, springing suddenly to his feet, and stretching up his clinched hands as though in appeal to the heaven above him. "It is a baseless, groundless, cruel lie! I feel it! I know it!"

"To-morrow I will go down and see for myself," he added, after a few moments, in a calmer frame. "It is my duty to go and sift this calumny." And who can tell what secret joy there was not in the man's mind that it was as a duty and not as a weakness that this long-hankered-for visit had presented itself finally to his mind?

Yet he sat far into the night, tormenting himself over the thing which he had declared to be a lie, and which, as such lies have a habit of doing, kept coming back and back to him in different shapes to fill his soul with remorse and torture. And over and above all the other devils that had set to themselves the task of tormenting him throughout the hours of darkness, there was one special imp that drove his poisoned weapons deeper into his vitals than all the rest, and whose whispers hissed hideously in his ears the whole night long.

"Arthur Conway is young, and handsome,

and enthusiastic," repeated the imp, very much in the same words that Mrs. Stourton had used in speaking of him. "He is a favorite with women, he has all the tricks to win and fascinate them at his finger-ends; while you,—you are forty, and your hair is gray at the temples, and you are a prig, a formal narrow-souled bachelor, wrapped up in yourself and your hobbies! What do you suppose there is about *you* to take the fancy of a girl of twenty-one? But Arthur Conway is young, and handsome," etc., etc. And again the category of his cousin's many attractions would be enumerated one after the other by that persevering and soul-destroying imp of darkness. Now, the name of that imp was Jealousy.

CHAPTER XII.

"Is Mrs. Bryant at home?"

"No, sir; Mrs. Bryant is out riding."

"Oh! then I will wait till she comes in."

Jane looked at him doubtfully. He was certainly dressed like a gentleman, but then she had never seen him before, and nobody can tell in these levelling days whether a well-clad stranger may not harbor deep designs on the plate, beneath the sheen of his broadcloth. These prudent reflections having passed rapidly through Jane's discriminating mind, she placed herself firmly and stolidly in the door-way, and declined to allow the gentleman to enter the house.

"Stand aside, girl," he said, with a frown and a slight angry gesture. "I am Mr. Bryant."

"You might have knocked me over with a feather, Sarah," said Jane to the cook, afterwards, when she had flown for refuge into the kitchen.

Valentine strode across the low hall into the drawing-room. He had been in the house before

he had taken it for Enid, and he knew his way about it. There were evidences of her presence in the charming room in which she was accustomed to live; her needle-work lay upon the table, her novel upon the sofa, the canary swung in his cage in the window, an old-fashioned bureau stood open near the fireplace, littered with writing materials and letters; and there were flowers everywhere, on the mantel-piece, on the piano, on the tables, to say nothing of those that came nodding in at the open windows; so that the room was scented like a garden.

There was something in this fragrance that soothed and consoled him, that disarmed his suspicions and quieted his nerves. He had come to find he knew not what, and he was met on the threshold by this bouquet of pure fresh scents that somehow brought back to him once more the candid purity of the lovely face that had smiled at him across the jonquils and the hyacinths on the day she had sat at his table with the knot of Parma violets at her throat. He sat down and waited for her; he was not impatient, although he waited for more than an hour; an absorbing expectancy stilled every

feeling of his heart save one,—the desire to see her.

His eyes were riveted to the door by which he himself had come in, and by which he expected her also to enter. He longed to hear her foot-step outside, to see the handle turn, and the door open. Would she look surprised to see him, or frightened, or only cold and angry? What was he going to say to her? He hardly knew. There was so great a tumult of thought within him, it was difficult to know what first would find expression in words.

Then all at once there were sounds in the garden, footsteps along the gravel path, and voices close outside the house. Nothing happened as he had anticipated.

She did not pass the drawing-room at all, but came into the house by the window of the adjoining room, the dining-room. The door between the two rooms stood ajar; there was a heavy portière curtain draped across it. Through the narrow open space he caught a glimpse of the slender figure in the close-fitting habit as she crossed the room, and of a man in breeches and riding-boots who followed her, it was Arthur Conway.

Bryant's heart beat violently. There was a singing noise in his head, and every pulse of his body leaped and tingled; a horrible pang of hatred and of jealousy shot through his heart, and with it a sudden self-revelation; for jealousy means love distorted, and he realized that he hated the man because he loved the woman.

Then he shrank back behind the sheltering curtains that hung across the door, creeping up quite close to them, so that he might listen without being seen.

"Here is your lemon-and-soda," he heard her say. "If you are so thirsty, come and drink it." The tone of her voice was measured, almost angry.

"I won't drink anything or ever come into your house again if you look so cross and angry!" was the young man's reply. "Aren't you going to forgive me, Enid? I really can't see what I have said so very dreadful."

"You know very well that I will not hear anything on that subject," she answered, coldly. "You have no right to mention it to me."

"I have the right of a man who cares about your happiness. After all, I am your only

friend. What does he do for you, I should like to know?"

"He does nothing at all. At the same time, he is my husband," she answered, firmly.

"The law would set you free from such a husband. Are you to be tied for life to a man whose wife you are only in name? who gives you neither love nor protection, who makes no attempt to see you, who leaves you at the mercy of any fate that may chance befall you? A pretty kind of husband! Let me go and see him and tell him to his face what I think about his conduct!"

"If you dare to interfere in my affairs I will never speak to you again."

"Enid, forgive me! don't look so angry. Of course I wouldn't do anything to annoy you for the whole world. Only I must confess it makes me mad to hear you sticking up for a fellow like that, who just leaves you to be miserable or to go to the devil, for all that he cares,—wretched selfish brute!"

"Look here, Arthur, you mean it kindly, I am sure, but it is just as well that you should understand me once for all, and then you won't go on making these mistaken speeches. I dare

say it does seem to you strange that, as you say, I should stick up for Valentine. I dare say he has treated me, as you say, very badly, very cruelly. I don't want to think about that: it is true, very likely, but it has nothing to do with—with myself. There is something I don't think you know; because if you knew it, or had guessed it, you would not, I am sure, wound me so horribly by saying all these things." She paused: the broken, halting words seemed to fail her; there was a sob in her voice.

Arthur Conway had taken her hand in his:

"Dear Enid, what is it? What is it?"

After a moment of silence, during which she appeared to be struggling for self-command, she spoke again, in a low, tremulous voice:

"It is only—that I love him——"

"You love him, Enid?" he repeated, in astonishment. "But what has he ever done to deserve that you should love him?"

"Nothing, I suppose. But one does not measure love in that way. It is not because a man is kind or good that a woman loves him; it is, I suppose, because of something in one's self. You see, it can make no difference what he does, or how he treats me,—no difference, I

mean, in what I feel; that is always here, in my heart."

"But, good heavens! what hope can there be in such a love as that? What future can you have?"

"Very little, I am afraid, Arthur." And the faint smile died away into a sigh. "But still, I say to myself, I am his wife, after all. Perhaps some day he may be ill or unhappy and may want some one, and then I shall go to him and nurse him or comfort him, because I shall have the right to go to him, which no one else can have. Oh, even that chance is worth living for."

There was a brief silence. The listener behind the curtain door had crouched down, burying his face in his hands.

Enid stood erect; her head was thrown a little back; her wide-opened eyes were fixed upon the green hills of the distant landscape, as though already they saw a far-away vision of that which her fancy had conjured up. Arthur Conway watched her with strangely mingled feelings.

"You are a very good woman, Enid," he said at last, in a voice that was unusually low and

gentle. "I don't know that I ever met any one so good as you are."

She turned upon him with a little laugh of amusement.

"Good?" she echoed, gayly. "In what way am I good, Arthur?"

"You have a faithful heart," he answered, with a sober seriousness. "I don't know that it is a virtue that counts for very much now-a-days, but at any rate it is rare, and when by chance one comes across it one cannot help but reverence it. No, I won't stay to lunch, thanks! Good-by, my white-souled cousin Enid. I think you have taught me something to-day. May God give you the happiness you deserve!"

And what of him who had heard it all? Smitten to the heart with penitence and remorse, humbled to the very dust, yet filled with a joy unspeakable, such as he could scarcely bare to face, which blinded him as the rays of heaven's sun, approached too nearly, may blind and scorch the feeble eyes of poor short-sighted human beings, Valentine Bryant arose, drew back the curtain, and stood there in the open door-way, facing her whom he had come to detect and to punish and whom he remained

to reverence and to adore. She turned and saw him. His face was pale, but his eyes shone with a strange keen light, such as she had never seen in them before.

"Valentine!" She stood irresolute, her heart beating, her color going and coming, her whole attitude one of uncertainty and doubt.

"Is it true?" he said, in a voice scarcely above a whisper.

"Is what true?"

"That—that—you love me?"

The color rushed in a flame all over her face and throat. Her head drooped.

"You heard?" she murmured, with a strange confusion.

"I heard everything. Enid, my wife!"

She looked up startled. He reached out his arms to her.

Shyly, timidly, like a child who is frightened, she crept up to him step by step, and laid her two hands in his. Her eyes could not meet his: her long lashes swept her burning cheek. Then he drew her into his arms, and she lay on his breast, her beating heart resting against his.

"Oh, my wife! can you ever forgive me?"

What a blind fool I have been to believe that I could cast you off, and forget you!"

He led her back into the drawing-room behind him: the drapery fell down again across the closed door. Tenderly and gently he placed her in a chair and knelt down before her, his arms encircling her slender waist, his gray-sprinkled head bowed upon her knee: no worshipper ever knelt more reverently, no lover ever sued for pardon more humbly, than did this two-months husband to the wife he had used so ill.

And she forgave him. Did ever true woman fail to forgive the man she loves, however badly he may have treated her?

Not many words came to either of them at the first: their happiness was too great, the wonder of it all too new and strange. Their lips met in their first kiss of love, and in the divine silence of that kiss no words were needed to tell to each what lay in the heart of both.

"Ah, why did you not tell me you loved me before?" he murmured in her ear, his lips still pressed against the warm whiteness of her slender throat.

"You never asked me, you know," she an-

swered, with a little happy laugh. "How could you expect me to volunteer the information?"

"What made you love me? Was I not old, and stupid, and uninteresting?—more like an uncle, as you said?"

"Yes, that is all quite true," she replied, with a demure twinkle in her happy eyes, "but I believe, for all that, I loved you from the first moment I saw you, even at Hillside."

"If I had only guessed it!"

"Well, but you, Valentine—what has wrought this miracle in you?—you, who did not want a wife, who married me against your will, who have looked upon me, I know, as an unwelcome burden you neither desired nor deserved! It is you, sir, who must give an account of this wonderful transformation of your whole self."

"It is perhaps a miracle," he answered, thoughtfully. "The cleverest of us can never wholly understand himself. I think there has been something there all along; it was, I suppose, the leaven of your sweetness and your beauty sown in my hard old heart. I tried so hard to fight against it, to crush it down, to believe it had no existence; then all at once it burst into life. It was like a fire that has

smouldered for a long time and that all at once shoots up into sudden flame. It took me by storm; it left me bleeding and helpless. It brought me here,—to your feet,—to your arms!”

“How was it?” she persisted, smoothing the crisp gray-sprinkled curls upon his brow with tender fingers,—how he revelled in those gentle fairy touches, he who had never been loved before!

“It was jealousy that kindled my love into life, Enid,” he whispered.

“Jealousy!” and she pushed him a little away from her. “Oh, but how could that be?”

“I may as well confess everything. I was jealous of Arthur Conway.” And then he told her all: how he had heard her name spoken lightly in a railway-carriage and coupled in a shameful fashion with that of his young cousin; then how mingled rage and remorse had torn him in twain, and had made him resolve to come down and see for himself; and how, although his better self had cried out against the foul lie that had been spoken of her, yet even here, in her house, upon that very door-way, when he had seen young Conway come in with her, his jealous anger had flamed out again, until her

own words, to which he had meanly listened unseen, had dispelled the evil demon that had possessed him, and laid it in the dust forever.

"Did I see too much of Arthur, then?" she inquired, thoughtfully. "You see, I had known him before; he used to write little notes to me at Hillside,—which I used to go out and look for in the early morning."

"Ah, I remember, between the holly-bush and the garden fence!" And the curious little scene came back to him,—the garden redolent of spring flowers, the curtained window out of which he had peered on that never-to-be-forgotten April morning, and the girl's odd movements that had puzzled him and interested him in her, even before he had seen her face.

"You know?" she said, in surprise. "Ah, well, then you will understand. I had met Arthur at a ball. He was kind to me, he seemed to like me. I told him something about my unhappiness and my fears, just what I wanted to tell you when you came to Hillside. I was always looking out for some friend to help me. Arthur used to write to me; they were very silly letters, I am afraid," she admitted, blush-

ing. "I am ashamed when I think of them now, and so is he, I think. And they did no good, because he always suggested that I should run away with him, and—and I did not want to do that at all. When you promised to be my friend, I liked that much better, and I quite forgot poor Arthur, I am afraid. But when one day I met him again here, I was so unspeakably delighted to see him: I was like the traveller in the African desert who meets a white man. I had no one to speak to, no one at all. I was so horribly lonely!"

"My poor child, what a brute I have been to you!"

"He said he would be my friend, and that he would never let me be lonely any more. You will not be angry with Arthur, will you? I could not help being glad and grateful to him. He has been here every day, I think. Was it wrong, Valentine?"

"No, my sweet, no. If there has been any wrong in it, it is all my fault. I ought never to have left you. But we will put all that right now, Enid. Will you let me come here and live with you?"

"You want to live here? to stay with me

now?" she cried, a great and glad surprise flushing her face and shining in her eyes.

"Alas, to-day I cannot stay! I should like never to leave you again, but all to-morrow I must be in town. I shall not be able to get to you till Saturday, the day after to-morrow, but I then intend to come down to you, bag and baggage, if you will take me in, dear wife."

"And you will leave your beautiful rooms in Lincoln's Inn, that you are so fond of?"

"Certainly I shall. What do the rooms signify? I am going to learn to love the country; we will live here through the summer, and in the autumn we will take a house in London, and my rooms must be dismantled, and the things will help to furnish our new home. I think," he added, drawing her to him with a sudden passion, "that the hours will be very long and dreary until we meet again, my wife, my love, my life!"

She drove him back to the station in her pony-cart when the time came for him to go.

"I am almost glad," she said to him as they paced the platform of the little wayside station together,—“that you should go away now and leave me to the joy of looking forward. The

day after to-morrow! only one clear day: it is nothing! The time will pass so quickly, and I shall be able to get everything prepared for you. I shall be as happy as a bird, Valentine, waiting for you, and making ready for Saturday."

"Let us have Saturday to ourselves, dearest," he said, as the train came in sight, "but write and tell that scamp Arthur to come over to dinner on Sunday, and I will ask some old friends of mine to come down for the day too, so that we may have a little gathering to celebrate our true bridal day."

The train, that relentless divider of those who would fain remain together still, came up. Bryant jumped into a carriage; Enid hung for a moment against the door-way, her hands clasped in his, her beautiful eyes full of love and happiness, with just the shadow of an unshed tear in them to add to their lustrous loveliness.

"Only till Saturday, my own!" he said, in a passionate whisper, and his face bent down so close to hers that he caught the fragrance of the red roses in the bosom of her dress.

"Only till Saturday" she echoed, with a smile, and then the train moved on, and their hands parted.

And still, as the distance widened and widened between them, he leaned from the window and looked back. To the very last he saw her standing there, all wrapped in the rays of the setting sun, smiling and waving her hand in farewell, a slender graceful figure in her white cotton dress and wide straw hat, with the bunch of crimson roses gleaming blood-red upon her breast.

CHAPTER XIII.

ALL day long he was like a school-boy on the eve of the holidays.

There was an important case going on in the Law Courts,—it was the well-known case of *Grimes vs. Green*,—and from ten till four Mr. Bryant had to be present at the trial in the interest of the defendant, who was his client. But there was during the whole of these weary hours such a flood of rippling happiness within him that he experienced the greatest difficulty in composing his features into the gravity suitable to the occasion. At all sorts of odd moments little fugitive smiles kept forcing their way up to his lips, and there was sunshine in his eyes and song in his heart. Even when at the close of the long hot day in the stuffy atmosphere of the court the verdict was finally given for the plaintiff, three hundred pounds damages, and costs, Mr. Bryant could only just contrive to veil the outer evidences of his internal exhilaration so that they should not be indecorously

displayed in the very teeth of the catastrophe and under the nose of his discomfited client.

As he left the court, several friends congratulated him on his appearance, or remarked to each other in his hearing on his unusual aspect of good spirits and cheerfulness.

"You look as if you had come into a fortune, old man," said one of his intimates to him, "instead of having just lost your case."

"I think it is something of the kind," he answered, irrelevantly.

"Never saw you looking so well in all my life," said another: "only last week you were a wreck."

Bryant broke away from the little knot of men who surrounded him, and who were as ready with their chaff as with their felicitations, and jumped into a hansom.

Before long he found himself alighting at the familiar door in Halkin Street.

Mrs. Challenger was at home; he had, in fact, sent her a telegram to apprise her of his intended visit, and he knew that she would be waiting for him.

Marion was sitting up-stairs by herself. She had prepared tea for her visitor's refreshment,

and, truth to say, she looked forward to seeing him with the most mingled sensations, coupled with no little excitement of mind.

These visits of his, which used to be so frequent, and which she used to prize so much, had now become extremely rare, and had lost to her all their pleasure and piquancy. The knowledge that she was no longer in his confidence, and that Bryant was systematically deceiving her concerning the most important event in his life, took all the taste out of her enjoyment of his society.

Still, as he had telegraphed that he wished to see her to-day very particularly, she felt a certain amount of exhilaration in the thought of the disclosures he might be about to make her.

"Perhaps he is desperately unhappy, poor fellow," she said to herself. "This woman is leading him a life, I dare say, and he turns to me, his oldest friend, for counsel and for comfort. Well, I shall most certainly give him a piece of my mind before I consent to help him in any way. I am not going to let him off too easily."

There was a little nervousness in her manner as she rose to receive him.

"This is good of you, my dear Princess," he said, as he deposited his hat, calling her by the old pet name once more. "It is like yourself to be in to see me. And tea! Oh, how I long for a cup of tea! Give me one at once, please, ere I perish! I do think, dear lady, that you have the very best five-o'clock tea in all London. But it is only of a piece with everything else."

These subtle flatteries disarmed her, as he doubtless intended them to do.

"You don't come very often to drink it nowadays," she said, smiling at him, as she began to manipulate the teapot and the cream-jug.

He sat down opposite to her: the little tea-table and its dainty service of delicate china and shining silver stood between them. As she gave him his cup, she glanced at him scrutinizingly. He did not look in the least miserable. On the contrary, she thought she had never seen him look more youthfully radiant and happy.

"Perhaps she is dead, and he is free again," she thought, with a grim feminine vindictiveness.

He took great gulps of his tea. He was thirsty, and his throat was unusually parched; perhaps he was nervous too. She determined

that he should speak first; she was not going to help him out by any leading questions.

When he had drunk two cups of tea and eaten half a tea-cake, he found himself reduced to his last intrenchment. He glanced at her a little dubiously. Marion looked persistently in another direction; in proportion as he grew embarrassed she became calm and composed. Then he cleared his throat slightly.

"Now it is coming," she thought. "Aha, my friend! how are you going to get it out, I wonder!" But outwardly she preserved a serene and unbroken silence.

"My dear, kind Princess," he began, with a little hesitation, "I sent you that telegram to-day because I wanted to see you about something very particular."

"Yes. That is what you said in the telegram."

This, he felt, was cruel. There was a moment's pause, and then he began anew on another tack altogether:

"You are the best and oldest friend I have in the world,—you and Tom too. You have always been to me the kindest of counsellors, the truest and staunchest of partisans, the most sympathizing of comforters."

Then again he paused.

"It is very kind of you to say such pretty things," she remarked, demurely.

"It is not because things are pretty, but because they are true," he said, earnestly; "otherwise I should not come to you to-day."

"Ah," she thought, "all these flatteries are clearing the way for the shock."

"In fact, it is because I know you to be so wise, and kind, and discreet——" and again he paused.

"My dear fellow," with a little impatience, "when you have quite done beating about the bush, perhaps you will kindly come to the point with no further delay."

He reddened, and looked down fixedly at the carpet beneath his feet.

"To begin with, Princess," he began, falteringly,—“to begin with, I have a confession to make to you.” And he blurted out the last words abruptly.

"You need not make it. I know it already. You are married!"

"Good heavens! How on earth did you know it?" he cried, considerably startled.

"Never mind how I know it," reddening in

her turn, and evading a direct reply. "Do you take me for a fool? I have known it for some time,—ever since our return from abroad, in fact."

"You must be a witch!" he said dumfounded. "I cannot imagine how you found it out. It was never announced in the papers."

"I know that very well. And I leave you to guess, from your own strange *sècrecy* and reticence, what sort of an opinion I must have formed of your conduct, and what sort of marriage I necessarily imagine you to have made." Her tone was high and mighty; she tossed her head disdainfully.

"If you only knew—as you never will know—all the facts of the case," he faltered with considerable confusion, "you might make some excuses for me."

"I can find no excuses for a man who makes a secret marriage and does not even live honestly with the woman he marries,—and who deceives his best friends," she added, almost in tears. This last accusation was apparently so much the most serious in her mind that Bryant recovered his courage and laughed a little in spite of himself.

"Oh, it is all very well to laugh," she went

on, angrily; "I think it disgraceful of you, Valentine! And you, who used to protest that you would never, never marry, that you hated the idea of it, and that you thought it downright wicked of a man to marry any woman unless he felt that he could not live without her! Those are your own words, mind! I have not forgotten them, though now, I suppose, you would like to retract them."

"I retract nothing. It is perfectly true. It is because it is true that I have come to see you to-day."

"Is it not true that you have committed the wickedness of marrying a woman you don't care about?"

"It *was* true. It is true no longer," he replied, gravely.

"For goodness' sake, explain yourself. You are talking in riddles," she cried, impatiently.

"Very likely; for I am a riddle to myself. Shall I try to make my meaning clear?"

"Certainly. One moment: tell me first, when we went away abroad, when you and I had that talk together the evening before we started, and you told me you would never marry, could never even fall in love,—were you married then?"

"Certainly not. How can you suppose it?"

"Were you in love? were you thinking of marrying?"

"I give you my word of honor that such a thing had never entered my head," he answered, emphatically.

She felt a little soothed by this admission.

"When, then," she continued, in a depressed manner,—“when did this calamity befall you?"

He laughed then outright:

"It was almost immediately after you left. I cannot tell you quite why or how it happened, but certain entirely unforeseen circumstances arose which forced me into an immediate marriage. The lady was thrown upon my protection; I felt that I was bound in honor to give her the only support I could."

"Why did you keep it a secret? Why, at any rate, did you not tell us?"

"Because I did not love her. I did not, in fact, intend, at the time, to do any more than I could help for her. She left me immediately after our marriage; and till yesterday I had not seen her again."

"Good heavens! What an extraordinary idea! What a very singular person you are, Valentine!"

She began to melt towards him. If this marriage, which was no marriage, was all that had happened to him, then the old relations might be renewed, and there need be no violent disruption of their friendship. She drew her chair nearer.

"Go on," she said, eagerly; "this is really very interesting. And this lady, then, exercised no influence upon your life at all?"

"She did not. I made no change in my way of life. I had determined to live apart from her. She likes the country; I arranged that she was to live there, whilst I remained in London. That was my scheme."

"A very sensible and comfortable scheme too!" interjected Mrs. Challenger, laughing: "slightly selfish, perhaps, and hard on the girl. That, however, is a detail to a man's mind. Well, this being the case——?"

"This *was* the case, but——" and he lifted his eyebrows and smiled, making a deprecating little gesture with his hands.

"But—what?"

"Something unforeseen has happened."

"What is that?"

The color rose in his face as with any young lover of twenty:

"I have had the misfortune—to fall in love with my wife!"

"Oh—h!"—a long-drawn-out "Oh!" of comprehension.

"That alters the case entirely, you see," he continued, apologetically.

"I suppose so." For a moment she was silent. There was an end of him, then. No more nice cosey talks by the fireside; no more little intimate dinners; no more exciting interchange of sentiments upon life, and love, and feeling! Always for the future there would be "the Wife!" *She* would have to be included now in all those small festivities which had rendered their intercourse so delightful. *She* would sit by, and listen, and disapprove, no doubt, of her husband's old friend. Do not wives always disapprove of the ante-nuptial friendships of their husbands with married women?

She got up and took a turn or two about the room in her agitation. If he had not loved his wife it might not have made so much difference; but if he was in love with her——!

"He might just as well be dead, for all the good he will ever be to me!" she thought, bitterly; for no woman likes to feel that her reign

is over. And then she stood still in the middle of the room and looked at him.

There was a smile upon his lips, and an appeal in his eyes. He threw back his head a little against the back of his chair, and reached out his hand towards her: it was a gesture of his that was very familiar to her. It brought back to her many a little scene of their past intercourse, scenes when she had been impatient and had perhaps lost her temper with him, and when he had temporized and smoothed her down, knowing full well how to touch the best things in her nature and how to ignore the rest.

That was what he was doing now; and she knew it, and began to relent all at once.

"You won't refuse to help me, will you, Princess?" he said, gently.

"To help you?" She drew nearer to him, and laid her fingers lightly in his outstretched palm. "What do you want of me, you abominable wheedling person?"

"I want you to be your own true, broad-minded, generous-hearted self, fair Princess. I want you first, and above all things, to forgive me."

"Flatterer! You know that I can't help myself. And what next do you want, pray?"

"I want you and Tom to come down into Hertfordshire by the 10.45 train on Sunday morning and spend the day with myself and wife."

"Well, upon my word! Your audacity surpasses imagination! What on earth do you want us for? We are quite out of it now, I imagine."

"You know very well that you are nothing of the sort. You know very well that you are, and always will be, if you choose to be so, my best and dearest friend; and you also know perfectly that a man doesn't want to drop his best friends because he has found a wife. On the contrary, he wants a good woman friend more than ever; especially if, as in my case, his wife is very young and very inexperienced. I want you to be my Enid's friend, Marion, and to help her to take her place and hold her own in the world. Will you not do me this one good service more, in addition to all the kindnesses that you have heaped upon me for years?"

Impossible for a woman like Marion Challenger to resist such an appeal.

She was like a prickly pear, all thorns and hard rind without, but those who knew her well knew also that at heart the fruit was sound and good.

She told him, of course, that she would do anything in the world he wished.

"Then you will come down on Sunday?"

"Of course we will, Valentine, if you really think that Mrs. Bryant will like us to come."

"Mrs. Bryant will like anything that I like. You see, Marion," he added, after a moment's hesitation and with a little shamefacedness, "I have not behaved over-well to my little girl. I did not mean to make her unhappy, but I am afraid I have somehow managed to do so. But now we understand each other, and I want to make up to her for the past. So we are going to make our true marriage begin from now. To-morrow I am going down to stay there, I think, and I believe that it will be in very truth the happiest day of my life. But Sunday must be a happy day as well. We are going to make a little feast of it; and how am I to have a bridal feast without my best friend to share my joy?"

"Very well, you may count upon us; we will

come and wish you both happiness." She answered kindly, but perhaps a little sadly.

But the little shade of feeling was lost upon Valentine.

She had consented to come: that was all he wanted.

"You are a good sort, Marion," he cried, as he rose to wish her farewell,—“the very best! And if you will only be Enid's friend as well as mine, you will indeed be good to me, far better than I deserve.”

After he was gone, she stood thoughtfully for a moment or two in the centre of the room; and presently a smile broke slowly over her face.

“He is quite right,” she said, aloud. “I am good to him, very good,—much better than he deserves. But, then, is not that what women always are to the men who depend upon them? They take us, they use us, they neglect us, they leave us, just as it suits them at the moment. We give them our highest and our best, they pay us back with empty words. They accept our smiles and our sacrifices alike, but they are blind to our tears and utterly unconscious of our self-immolations. And yet, for ever and

ever, as long as the world shall last, women will go on flinging themselves into the bottomless abyss of man's profound and unfathomable selfishness! And it is not only the fools who do it," she cried, suddenly throwing up her hands with a gesture of anger. "Oh, no! If it was only the fools! But we are all alike, wise and foolish, only often it is the wise ones who are the worst. There lies the pity of it! The cleverest of us fall the deepest. The shrewder the brain, the softer the heart."

CHAPTER XIV.

THE morning broke gray and still, with just a promise of sunshine in the air, and warm with the tender softness of midsummer. Enid threw open her window, and, leaning against the narrow casement, looked out upon the quiet country scene. The world seemed still to sleep. A little swan's-down mist floated over the hills, the dew lay thick upon the garden lawn, the flowers had scarcely opened their hearts to greet the new day, the birds were hardly yet awake: it was only Enid who was up and alive so early.

"To-day!" she whispered to herself, with a little hush of solemn joy at her heart.

To-day, unknown things were to begin for her,—things she had only dreamed of,—Life, and Love, and Joy!

A childhood of loneliness and cold neglect, a girlhood empty of affection and sympathy, haunted with cruel fears and made bitter by actual persecution; then, one gleam of happier things that had flashed meteor-like across her path, only to be quenched again at once into

a dreary hopelessness,—this hitherto had been Enid's experience of life. Now something else was come to her. She, who had been taught only the sad lesson of patience, was to learn now how to be happy. The divine mystery of Love, that enchanted cup that all mankind in turn thirst and long for, had been held out to her also; already she had drunk deeply of that magic draught. Her lover's words still rang like music in her ears, the memory of his kisses still lingered upon her lips, bringing the blood in a hot flame to her cheek, and that lover, was he not her husband, her own already?

How short a time ago it had seemed to her that the secret of her heart was fraught only with shame and sadness; shame because she loved in vain, sadness because she never saw him! It had been a thing she had striven to stifle, to bury, to forget. But now she was ashamed no longer; Valentine loved her, everything was changed, and the whole world was welcome to know her secret!

“Valentine! my lord, my king, my love!” she cried aloud as she reached out her hands towards the sky and the hills and the earth, and it seemed to her happy fancy as though

the quiet scene before her only waited for its master, as though her paradise of flowers and birds and woods only slept until he should come to it, to awaken it into sunshine and joy.

The morning post brought her a letter,—only a few hurried lines: he could not be with her till the afternoon.

The hours, it seemed to her, would never pass. She went over all her little household preparations for his reception, preparations that all day yesterday she had been occupied in planning and arranging, with that eager delight that love alone can lend to hospitality; for although he was coming to his own, her king, was he not coming also—oh, best and gladdest thought!—as her guest?

The maids were busy up-stairs and down-stairs. The house was full of activity; the very air seemed to breathe a welcome. With loving hands Enid filled every bowl and vase in every room with fresh flowers, with the flowers she knew he loved best, the flowers that were fragrant, roses, heliotrope, jasmine, and carnations, bunches of mignonette, and long trails of scented verbenas. The whole house was soon redolent of their sweetness. It was as though

all the flowers of the garden had transplanted themselves into a veritable fairy-land in-doors.

When her labors were all completed, it was still early, not yet twelve o'clock. What was she to do to while away the long slow hours till he came? how could she best cheat the lagging time into going more quickly?

She bethought her of her mare. "I will go out for an hour's gallop," she thought: "it will do me good, and it will help to pass the time."

As a matter of fact, she was too excited to sit still: action was necessary to her.

She made the change in her dress, and her mare was brought round to the door.

She rode towards the hills. There was a grassy ridge to which she often went, a long stretch of three-quarters of a mile over the soft springy turf: it was a favorite ride of hers. She went there to-day. Her mare was fresh: no sooner did she set her feet upon the turf than, with a little shake of her bridle and a little flourish of her heels, she started off along the familiar green slope. Enid let her have her head; the swift rush through the air made her pulses leap, the soft wind, as it swept by

her, warmed her blood and ruffled the stray locks of her hair; she felt a sense of freedom, an exhilaration of her whole being. The wild quick gallop seemed to keep time to the dancing delight of her heart. How happy she was! How good she felt it to be alive! how golden gay was all the world on this glorious morning of joy and gladness!

Joy and Sadness! Sickness and Health! Life and Death! The boundary-line is but a hair's breadth, and the changes are forever ringing between the two!

On one side, all that is fairest and brightest, and on the other, darkness and silence. Who is to say where the line is laid, where the one is to end and the other 'to begin?

Such a little thing! Such a pitiful little thing! Only a little, feckless, burrowing animal, soft-coated, gentle-eyed, and as easily frightened away as the summer butterflies in the grass above its head. How can such a thing as this work so frightful a ruin?

Alas! in the immutable laws of this strange, sad world of ours lies the unfathomable answer. Small beginnings, great endings. Insignificant causes, gigantic results. That which is con-

temptible leading to that which is an irreparable disaster!

Just a rabbit-hole! Nothing more terrible or tragic than that,—a rabbit-hole!

A galloping horse, a gay confidant rider, no thought of danger ahead—then suddenly, in the twinkling of an eye, a stumble, a plunge, a crash! and the mare rolls over with a broken foreleg on to the turf, lashing out madly with convulsive and fearful struggles in her pain and terror.

And what of Enid? Did she suffer? Had she time to think? Did all the bitter waves of death pass over her sinking soul, and the despair of all she was leaving behind her untasted and unrealized add yet another pang of agony to her latest moment? No one ever knew.

Some laborers in a field hard by came running up. She breathed still, but her eyes were closed. The men lifted her up, and carried her, as gently and as tenderly as they knew how, back to her home.

* * * * *

There was nothing to meet him at the station. When he realized it, Bryant experienced a little

chill of disappointment. He looked about him helplessly for a moment, then, rallying himself upon so foolish a weakness, he addressed himself with energy to the practical subject of his luggage.

There was a lot of it. He interviewed the station-master, and arranged that it should be sent over in a cart to the Grange. Then, after another careful scrutiny of the white road outside that revealed to him no glimpse of a certain dun pony and brown village cart that somehow he had, unreasonably, no doubt, expected, he set off to walk by the short cut across the fields.

The Grange lay basking in the afternoon sunshine. The doors and windows were all wide open: as he neared it there did not seem to be a sign of life about the place. He came into the garden from the shubbery gate by the sunk fence, and strode across the lawn with quick eager footsteps, glancing impatiently up at the windows as he advanced,—a bridegroom who had come home to his bride, a lover with the hot blood of a new desire beating at his heart and dancing in his veins.

Where was she? Little flirt, to hide herself from him! She was doing it to tease him, pre-

tending to be shy! No sign of her sweet face looking out for him at the windows; not a vestige of her slight figure to be seen flying across the lawn to meet him.

"Ten thousand kisses shall be her punishment!" he thought, with all the glow of triumphant love at his heart.

He entered by the drawing-room window.

The whole air was heavy with the strong scent of the flowers, the canary was singing shrilly in his cage, and a little terrier of uncertain breed, whom he had thought to be banished to the stables, came up wagging his tail and clambered up against his leg to greet him; nothing else!

For the first time a little vague uneasiness filled his mind. Had she gone to the station, after all, to meet him, and had he missed her by coming by the fields? He wished now that he had kept to the dusty road; then he would have met her.

He opened the door into the hall. There was an oppressive silence in the house. Certainly Enid must be out. Yet he did not want to call the servants: he wanted to find her unannounced in this her home,—her home and his,—as a hus-

band comes back after his work and seeks out his wife wherever she may be.

He stood listening. What, all at once, was that strange faint sound overhead? the sound of smothered weeping! It seemed to come from above. With a few rapid strides he sprang up the short wide staircase.

In a window-seat on the landing above, a maid-servant sat with her apron flung over her head, rocking herself to and fro and sobbing bitterly.

At the sound of his hasty footstep she looked up, uttered a cry of dismay, and fled down the passage and disappeared through a green baize door at the end of it.

Half puzzled, half angry, he called out after her, but she was gone.

He looked uncertainly round the square, low-ceiled landing. The door of Enid's bedroom stood ajar. All at once it seemed to him that there were voices and people moving about behind that half-opened door.

He pushed it wide open and went in. The room was a long one, with two windows, one of them in a deep recess in which stood the dressing-table. The bed occupied the opposite

extremity. Bryant cast a bewildered look about him: he had never been in the room before. There seemed to be several persons in it, all crowded together at the farther end. An elderly man in a black frock-coat stood with his back to the door; he was stooping forward a little, but Bryant could see the top of his bald head, and the fringe of short white hair around it. Another man, younger and slighter and shabbier, was close behind the first: he seemed to be folding up some long strips of linen and pushing them hurriedly into a black bag. Two of the maid-servants, Enid's maid and the parlor-maid, were there, and there was the old coachman standing a little back from the rest, his honest face buried in his rough hands, and his shoulders shaking with smothered sobs.

The faces of them all were turned the other way; he could not see any of them. It was like a dream, or a scene in a play.

"There is nothing to be done. She is dead."

The words rang out with a horrible distinctness into the silence. It was the doctor who had spoken them. And at that moment the bridegroom crossed the threshold of the bridal chamber.

They made way for him in silence, standing back with awe-stricken and averted faces.

They had taken the torn and discolored habit from off her. She lay upon the white bed, all white herself and cold. There was neither pain nor terror stamped upon the serene purity of her silent face. The lips smiled a little, the eyes were closed as though in sleep, the waxen fingers lay lightly curved upon the sheet; there was only the dull blood-red of the stain upon her breast to tell of the cruel death-wound that had crushed out her bright young life, quenching all the glad hopes of the morning into the cold dews of an eternal night.

Thus he had seen her last, all dressed in white, with the blood-red roses on her heart. Surely she is only waiting for him to come back to her! She is asleep: it is time for her to wake!

Only till Saturday! only the day after to-morrow! it is nothing, the time will pass so quickly!

Presently she will open her eyes, she will give him a red, red flower, from the roses at her breast.

“Wake up, my love, my wife! Wake up!

Wake up! I have come back to you for always,
for ever!—Ah, my God! my God!"

* * * * *

"Mr. Bryant has fainted, doctor!"

They lifted him up and carried him senseless
out of the room.

* * * * *

Extract from Galignani's Messenger, September 20, 1891.

"A fatal accident occurred on Thursday last upon the upper Görner glacier. Mr. Valentine Bryant, a London solicitor of some note, accompanied by Louis Le Grand and Michael Turvel, two well-known Zermatt guides, both of them men of great experience, set out on the Wednesday afternoon from the Riffel for the purpose of ascending Monte Rosa. The party spent the night in one of the huts belonging to the Alpine Club, and started at daybreak on Thursday morning to cross to the glacier. All went well until they reached the junction of the Görner and Monte Rosa glaciers, where they found the ice in bad order, and steps had to be cut. In climbing up one of the steep séracs, Mr. Bryant suddenly lost his footing upon an ice step, and fell back into the crevasse below, the rope snap-

ping in two with the violence of his fall. Le Grand and Turvel made the most noble efforts to rescue their companion, Turvel descending by means of the rope for some depth into the crevasse, but he could see no trace of the unfortunate gentleman, who had disappeared entirely and to such a depth into the fissure that he must without doubt have perished almost immediately. After remaining for nearly ten hours upon the spot, in the vain hope of at least recovering his body, the two guides returned to Zermatt, bearing the melancholy news of the accident.

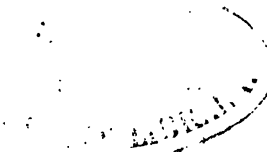
“Mr. Valentine Bryant was forty years of age. He had been suffering latterly from great depression of spirits, consequent upon the recent death, under somewhat tragical circumstances, of his wife, to whom he had been married for a very short time.

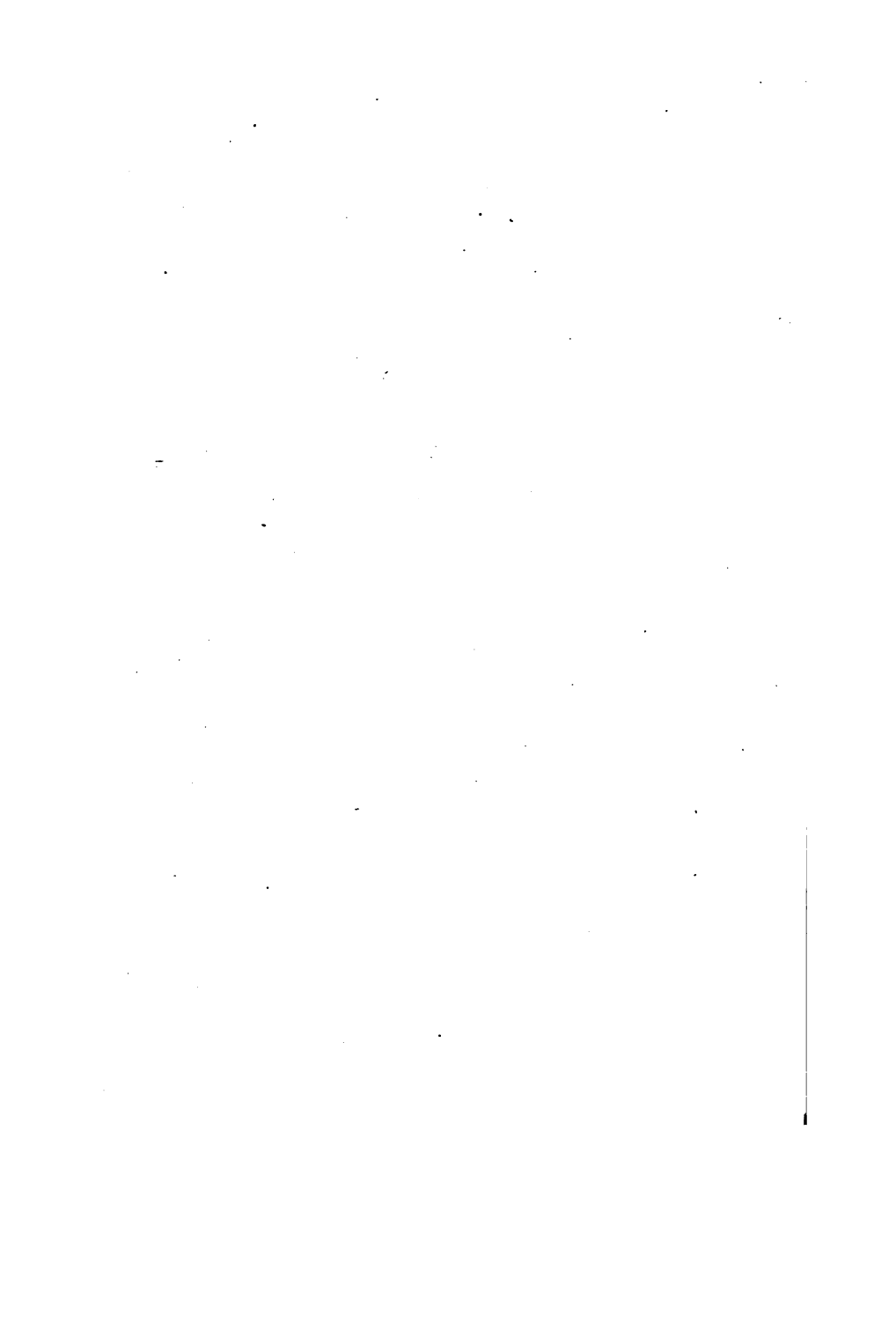
“It was by his doctor’s advice that Mr. Bryant had come to Switzerland, to seek mountain air and distraction of mind among the beautiful scenery, but where, alas, the unfortunate gentleman has only met with a sad and sudden death.

“We understand that Mr. and Mrs. Challenger, intimate friends of the deceased, have

arrived at Zermatt from England, in order to give the necessary directions for a stained-glass window which they propose to place in the little English church there, as a tribute to the memory of their lost friend." *L.*

THE END.





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